Faith and Attachments in *The Merchant of Venice*

# Introduction

The gold, silver and lead caskets, which I will argue provide the key to the play, represent respectively “gain[ing] what many men desire,” “get[ting] as much as [one] deserves” and “giv[ing] and hazard[ing] all [one] hath” (2.9.20-24, 2.9.36). The gold casket symbolises the unrestrained sensuality and self-love of “the fool multitude that choose by show,” whereas the lead and silver caskets seem to represent respectively the Christian injunction to care for others without seeking any sort of return and the Jewish code, which values just returns, whether in the form of dutiful gratitude or retribution (2.9.26). Whereas the gold undoubtedly symbolises the baser natural impulses, the silver and lead represent conventional codes which teach their adherents to transcend or restrain these impulses (2.9.26). The situation is more complex in the case of the silver casket, however, since, although the wish to “get what [one] deserves” may be reinforced by religious doctrine, it is also presented in the play as a powerful natural urge. The key issue which the play is designed to examine concerns the extent to which these three principles tend to support, or, conversely, degrade the deep attachments which, in Shakespeare’s view, provide the ultimate good. Shakespeare aims to explore this issue in an entirely open-minded way, whilst taking care to conform outwardly to the opinions of his time.

# The Lead Casket: to “Give and Hazard All”

At first Antonio denies that his nebulous depression is caused by a worry that his wealth is all tied up at sea, claiming that his “ventures are not in one bottom trusted, nor to one place” and, furthermore, that his “whole estate” does not depend “upon the fortune of this present year” (1.1.41-45).[[1]](#endnote-1) This latter claim turns out to be mendacious, however, since he is soon forced to admit to Bassanio that he will have to borrow the money “to furnish [him] to Belmont, to fair Portia,” since “all [his] fortunes are at sea” (1.1.177-82). Shylock, whose business it is to know such things, not only confirms this latter point, but adds that some of Antonio’s “ventures” have already been “squand’red abroad” (1.3.17-25). The relief which Antonio shows at the end of the play on hearing that some of his ships have been preserved confirms that he has in fact been deeply worried about them (5.1.286-88).

But why should Antonio, the eponymous merchant, who makes his living by trade, seek to deny that he worries about the ships which provide him with his living? Salerio’s assumption that his friend must often be distracted from his religious devotions by the resemblance between the “holy edifice of stone” and the rocks upon which his ships could at any moment founder introduces the idea that there is a tension between Antonio’s faith and his profession (1.1.29-36). I would argue that it is the merchant’s devout Christian belief which impels him to attempt to cultivate a lofty indifference to the very trade upon which his income depends. If taken seriously, the lead casket’s injunction to “give and hazard all” requires Christians to eschew any form of self-interest, including the very need to make a living.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Antonio also emphatically denies that his sadness stems from unrequited love, exclaiming “Fie, fie!” when Solanio advances this theory (1.1.46). Here too, however, his denial is immediately brought into question, in this case by his extreme generosity to Bassanio: “My purse, my person, my extremest means, lie all unlock’d to your occasion” (1.1.138-39).[[3]](#endnote-3) Although Solanio is mystified by Antonio at this point in the play, he later becomes convinced that his friend’s “embraced heaviness” is primarily a natural reaction to the prospect of losing Bassanio to Portia: “I think he only loves the world for him” (2.8.50). If Solanio is correct, Antonio’s refusal to admit to the grief which Bassanio’s plan to embark on “a secret pilgrimage” to win a “lady” has been causing him is as disingenuous as his denial that he is worried about his ships (1.1.119-21).

In his friendship with Bassanio, as in his professional life, Antonio seeks to repress his desire to secure a return. All his friend has to do is “say” he needs money and Antonio will immediately feel “prest” to offer him a loan, despite his own financial worries, and despite his desire to keep Bassanio by his side: “You do me now more wrong in making question of my uttermost than if you had made waste of all I have” (1.1.155-60). He ignores the fact that Bassanio has not repaid a previous debt, and is even prepared to borrow the money which his friend needs from the usurers whom he regularly condemns (1.1.146-47). Far from insisting that his friend should feel particularly obliged to him, Antonio never even distinguishes explicitly between these loans and the credit which he has offered “gratis” to so many of his peers, although it is clear that he treats Bassanio with particular generosity. It is left to Bassanio himself to acknowledge the special status of the relationship and to confirm that it naturally generates ineluctable obligations: “To you, Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love” (1.1.130-1).

I would argue that the nebulousness of Antonio’s melancholia is symptomatic of the difficulty of reconciling the Christian injunction “to give” selflessly “and hazard all” with the natural desire to secure a return for one’s efforts, either in personal or professional life.[[4]](#endnote-4) Just as Antonio cannot acknowledge, perhaps even to himself, that he is worried about his material “ventures,” so his pious adherence to this principle prevents him from admitting that he is dreading the loss of his beloved, and indeed even from allowing this fear to erode in the slightest degree his noble determination to support Bassanio’s pursuit of Portia. Striving to suppress his natural grief and anxiety in this way, he succeeds only in transmuting them into a “wear[y]” sense of futility, which perhaps even verges on nihilism, since he has cut himself off from the possibility of establishing a truly fulfilling attachment (1.1.2). His willingness to engage at length in the guessing game with Salerio and Solanio which this depression provokes is itself a sign that unremitting self-sacrifice is beyond the scope of human nature. He perhaps allows himself to relish his interlocutors’ obvious concern for his well-being, since he can reassure himself that he is not compromising his stance of pious altruism by making direct emotional demands upon his friends.

Antonio’s remark that he “hold[s] the world but as the world…a stage, where every man must play a part, and mine a sad one,” prompts Gratiano to offer a third explanation for his depression (1.1.77-78). He accuses his friend of deliberately cultivating a “willful stillness…with purpose to be dress’d in an opinion of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit,” and advises him to “fish not with this melancholy bait for this fool gudgeon, this opinion” (1.1.88-102). His charge that Antonio presents himself as “Sir Oracle”– “when I ope my lips let no dog bark!”–suggests that his friend’s sombre austerity is ultimately an expression of a pride which has been sublimated by his habitual piety (1.1.93-94). He implies that Antonio strives to distinguish himself by conforming rigorously to a faith which tends to value self-sacrifice and a contemplative life of “mortifying groans” above passionate interaction (1.1.82). Gratiano’s complaint, which seems to spring from his own much more robust sense of his own needs (see below), is that this stance of proud austerity prevents Antonio from engaging in the “mirth and laughter” which promotes “warm” friendships (1.1.79-86). I would suggest that Shakespeare too takes his bearings by the joys that such friendships may provide.

Although the apparently humble Antonio of course dismisses this theory too, there is much evidence that he does indeed strive to distinguish himself in precisely this way. He doubtless gratifies his pride by contrasting his own pure faith in “the hand of heaven” and ability to “produc[e] holy witness” with Shylock’s superstition and devilish corruption of the sacred text (1.3.91-102). His unusually extreme public condemnation of Shylock’s “bargains, and…well-won thrift, which he calls interest” is doubtless designed to underline his own superiority to such base acquisitiveness both in his own mind and in the eyes of his peers, even though in reality he too lives by exploiting his capital -indeed, even the philanthropic loans by which he hopes to demonstrate his own boundless generosity must presumably be funded by his hard-headed commercial ventures (1.3.44-51) The similarity between these two characters in professional terms is highlighted by the parallel between Antonio’s ultimate admission that his “life” depends on his “living” and Shylock’s final desperate plea: “you take my life when you do take the means whereby I live” (5.1.286, 4.1.376-77).[[5]](#endnote-5) Portia’s initial uncertainty in the courtroom as to “which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?” seems to underline this parallel (4.1.174).[[6]](#endnote-6)

Pursuing the theme of Antonio’s pride, we may infer that he introduces the idea that the bond should contain a harsh punitive clause in order to ensure that he can continue to condemn Jewish usurers with all his usual haughtiness, even after being forced to avail himself of their services (1.3.130-37). He also proudly suppresses his real fears when Shylock responds by proposing the pound of flesh contract: his repeated claims that he views this proposition as “kind” are undermined by his insistent assurances that he expects his ships to return “within these two months” (1.3.152-59, 1.3.178-81). The reliance which he places on this expectation–which, as we have seen, is itself less firm than he pretends–suggests that he is much more worried about the consequences of reneging on the debt than he acknowledges.

Overall, we may conclude that, as the quintessential Christian in the play, Antonio exposes the shortcomings of his faith. If taken literally, Christian teachings are incompatible with the need to make a living, the desire to win the affection of a beloved, and with the pursuit of acclaim, precisely because they honour, albeit necessarily in an unacknowledged way, those who strive to imitate Christ’s own entirely self-sacrificing love.[[7]](#endnote-7) Paradoxically, the motive which underlies the humble self-abnegation of the most devout Christians may thus be a proud determination to distinguish themselves from their more self-interested peers. Antonio’s wearisome sadness is primarily caused by this determination, which, crucially, precisely as the insightful Gratiano indicates, prevents him from forming fulfilling relationships (1.1.79-99). It is possible that the lead casket principle encourages self-regard to dominate precisely because it strips attachments of their normal rewards. Antonio’s egregious pride may itself be construed as an attempt to fill the “weary” void which is left once his faith has deprived him of the chance to pursue “the joys of heaven here on earth” through an intimate relationship (3.5.76; see below for an analysis of this line).

We may deduce Antonio’s priorities from the fact that he seems to find it increasingly difficult to refute the various analyses of his depression which his friends advance. By contrast to his explicit and relatively extended rejection of Salerio’s imputation of materialism, his insistence that he is not in love remains implicit, albeit emphatic: “Fie, fie!” (1.1.41-46). His mocking dismissal of Gratiano’s charge of pride is equally inarticulate, but apparently even more casual– “It is that–any thing now!” (1.1.113). However, he must appear visibly shaken by this latter charge, for Bassanio immediately feels the need to reassure him that Gratiano “speaks an infinite deal of nothing” -while acknowledging, perhaps inadvertently, that there are at least “two grains” of truth in the latter’s accusations (1.1.114-18). If the hierarchy of Antonio’s motives may be deduced from the increasing incoherence and indirectness of these three demurrals, we may infer that his love overshadows his acquisitiveness, but also that both these motives are themselves ultimately regulated by a proud self-regard, which, having been sublimated by his habitual piety, generally manifests itself as scrupulous self-denial.

Shakespeare outlines the hierarchy of Antonio’s priorities in a number of other ways. Firstly, it should be remembered that from one point of view the loan is itself a business venture, just as Bassanio argues, which could–and indeed in the end presumably does–result in the merchant retrieving not only his principle, but the principle from the previous loan, plus any recompense which a grateful friend and his lavishly generous wife might feel moved to bestow on him (1.1.140-52; see 3.2.299-307). Nevertheless, although Antonio is always more concerned with profit than he can allow himself to admit, his decision to finance such a risky venture undoubtedly shows that he prioritises his love for his friend over his need to make a living. Needless to say, his willingness to risk forfeiting a pound of his own flesh indicates that his affection for Bassanio is strong enough to override even his instinct for self-preservation, let alone his concern with self-advancement. However, as we have seen, his bold agreement to Shylock’s terms also reflects the pride which he takes in his own supposedly selfless generosity. We may infer that his overriding motive is self-regard, albeit of a highly sublimated variety, from the fact that he continues to show a haughty scorn for the Jew even as he is requesting the loan, since this intransigent approach could easily have induced the latter to refuse to provide him with the means to help his beloved.

Antonio’s approach to life turns out to be unsustainable, since, just as Gratiano maintains, he has deprived himself of the rewards that close relationships may confer. As the play proceeds, Antonio cannot sustain his stern effort to repress his longing for Bassanio to return his care. As he sees his friend off, he reassures him that he must not feel obliged to “make some speed of his return” from Belmont, urging him instead to “be merry, and employ [his] chiefest thoughts to courtship” (2.8.37-45). At the same time, however, the sharp contrast which he draws between his own subjection to “the Jew’s bond” and his friend’s freedom to devote himself to this courtship seems calculated to remind Bassanio of the unfairness of their relative situations. Subsequently, his prediction that his friend will be absolved of all material debts once Shylock has exacted his deadly forfeit appears to be subconsciously designed to exacerbate his beloved’s sense of obligation:

Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is

very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit; and since in paying it, it is impossible I should

live, all debts are clear’d between you and I, if I might but see you at my death.

Notwithstanding, use your pleasure; if your love do not persuade you to come, let

not my letter.

(3.2.315-22)

There is a contradiction here between Antonio’s initial assurance that Bassanio’s debt will automatically be “clear’d” and the subsequent conditional clause, which suggests that this remission is dependent on his return to Venice. By appending his passionate demand loosely to the main clause in this manner, Antonio is able to underline Bassanio’s obligations with a forcefulness which remains largely unacknowledged. He then strives to counter any residual impression that he is in fact calling in a debt by insisting that Bassanio too must present himself as motivated to return to his side entirely by spontaneous “love,” however grateful or guilty his beloved might actually feel. In this way Antonio doubtless imagines that he has eliminated from the relationship any transactional element which might debase the purity of his altruism, even as he is in reality appealing powerfully to Bassanio’s natural sense of obligation.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Similarly, although Antonio’s final words in act 3, scene 3– “Pray God Bassanio come to see me pay his debt, and then I care not!”–are phrased simply as a prayer, he no doubt anticipates that this comment, which underlines the unfairness of their relative positions, will be repeated to Bassanio by the gossipy Solanio, and that his friend will immediately feel obliged to do everything he can to repay “his debt” -as indeed he does (3.3.35-36). Thus, overall, despite appearances, Antonio does indeed “hazard all he hath” in the hope of securing a return. The doctrine of “giv[ing] and hazard[ing] all” to which he has been habituated cannot completely repress his deep need to see his care requited. We may infer that this conventional doctrine, which demands a studied altruism, is constantly in danger of being undermined by the natural urge to “get as much as [one] deserves” (2.7.7).

In the courtroom scene, Antonio continues to deny that he hopes to be requited by Bassanio for what he presents as an entirely willing sacrifice: “For if the Jew do cut but deep enough, I’ll pay it instantly with all my heart” (4.1.280-81). Again, however, his overt injunctions to Bassanio not to feel guilty after his death are subverted, not only by this gruesome pun, but by his insistent references to his beloved’s indebtedness: after enjoining him to “grieve not that I am fall’n to this for you,” he urges him to “repent but…that you shall lose your friend,” since he himself “repents not that he pays your debt” (4.1.266, 4.1.278-79). (It should be noted that the only substantial reason which Antonio offers for his acceptance of death here further undermines his assumption of unworldliness, since it reminds us of his financial worries: he expresses a concern that he would otherwise “outlive his wealth,” and be condemned to the “ling’ring penance” of “an age of poverty”: 4.1.267-72.) This cocktail of veiled reproaches and apparent self-abnegation effectively enflames Bassanio’s guilt: he would by now sacrifice “life itself, my wife, and all the world…to deliver” his friend from Shylock’s clutches (4.1.282-87).

I would argue that Antonio also attempts to call in the debt which the Christian community as a whole owes him for “lend[ing] out money gratis” (1.3.44). After abandoning his efforts to plead with Shylock–efforts which reveal that, despite the noble resignation which he displays during the courtroom scene, in accordance with his principle that he must transcend all material needs, he does in fact fear death–he resorts to reminding the community of its obligation to him, albeit in a characteristically indirect way: he tells Solanio that Shylock hates him because he has “oft deliver’d from his forfeitures many that have at times made moan to me” (3.3.3, 3.3.11, 3.3.21-24). Although he urges the garrulous Solanio to “go” even as he is portraying himself as passively resigned to his fate, his assertion that “these griefs and losses have so bated me that I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh” again seems designed, perhaps subconsciously, to enflame his friends’ guilt and pity (3.3.31-33).[[9]](#endnote-9)

Similarly, in the courtroom scene, the more determined he appears to be “to suffer, with a quietness of spirit…tyranny and rage,” and the more insistently he urges the court to “make no moe offers, use no farther means,” presenting himself as a helpless lamb at the mercy of a wolf, or a “tainted wether of the flock,” the more he provokes the pity and indignation of his myriad supporters, as Gratiano’s savage interjections demonstrate (4.1.10-13, 4.1.70-83, 4.1.114-16, 4.1.290-92). His comparison of himself to an uncomplaining lamb about to be slaughtered is all the more powerful because it is bound to remind a Christian court of the Crucifixion.[[10]](#endnote-10) Antonio’s unacknowledged machinations are really a way of reminding the community of the obligations which his humility and generosity have created, but they also point to the power of conventional doctrine to stunt and distort the manner in which the innate need to “get as much as [one] deserves” may manifest itself, since they preserve the fiction that he has transcended this need, along with all other material desires, including even the instinct for self-preservation.

After being freed by the court, Antonio finally feels emboldened to demand a more concrete return from his beloved, requiring him to give his wife an account of his devoted sacrifices, and “bid her be judge whether Bassanio had not once a love” (4.1.273-77). This apparently humble request in fact comes close to flaunting the precedence which he now–correctly, as it turns outs–presumes he must take over Portia in Bassanio’s hierarchy of obligations.[[11]](#endnote-11) Antonio’s natural gratitude to Balthazar for saving his life is so overwhelming that it finally threatens to override his usual distaste for anything that smacks of the transactional: he assures the lawyer that both he and Bassanio “stand indebted” to him “in love and service…evermore” (4.1.413-14). When the disguised Portia demands as her reward the ring which she gave to Bassanio to symbolise their mutual fidelity, Antonio cannot help interceding: “Let his deservings and my love withal be valued ‘gainst your wive’s commandement” (4.1.450-51). Here, although he attempts to distinguish between his own “love,” which could still be conceived of as given in a spirit of pure generosity, and Balthazar’s more mundane “deservings,” he comes close to admitting that his self-denying care naturally generates enormous obligations, and indeed to demanding that it be “valued” even above what one might have imagined to be Bassanio’s most intimate relationship. However, he is only able to free himself from his habitual constraints in this particular situation because he is apparently making this demand purely on Balthazar’s behalf. He never explicitly acknowledges that the value of the lawyer’s actions is actually dictated by the supremely “deserving...” sacrifices of the man whose life he has saved.

Later, when Bassanio’s ceding of the ring becomes the subject of a marital argument, Antonio again cannot resist highlighting the influence which he now exerts over his friend, albeit with a decorous appearance of regret: “I am th’ unhappy subject of these quarrels” (5.1.238). No doubt he relishes the task which Portia gives him of acting as “surety” for Bassanio’s fidelity, since it represents an acknowledgement, albeit made apparently in jest, that his beloved’s primary obligation will always be to himself (4.1.249-56). Overall, Antonio’s hypocritical behaviour in the second half of the play suggests that it is beyond the scope of human nature “to give and hazard all” without demanding “as much as [one] deserves.” At the same time, however, the doctrinal pressure to do so is shown to stunt and distort the natural urge to make such a demand, thus generating countless unconscious duplicities.

There is no indication in the play that Antonio’s one-sided generosity helps him to establish truly intimate relationships. In the opening scene his refusal to admit to the frustrated desires which have caused his depression merely “wearies” Solanio, who is eventually driven to argue that, if his sadness is indeed as groundless as he says, then he might as well choose merriment as maintain a “vinegar aspect” (1.1.1-5, 1.1.47-56). Having exerted themselves to help Antonio without success, Salerio and Solanio abruptly make their escape in this scene, no doubt with some relief, under the pretext that they are outranked by Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano (1.1.57-59). Antonio understands very well that they are simply “embrac[ing] th’ occasion to depart,” and attempts to reassure them that their “worth is very dear in [his] regard” (1.1.62-64). They are, however, unmoved by this characteristically veiled attempt to induce them to stay, while at the same time, by contrast, responding willingly to Bassanio’s invitation: “when shall we laugh?” (1.1.66-68). Lorenzo would also have left at this point, having arranged to meet with Bassanio “at dinner-time,” had it not been for Gratiano’s lengthy interjection (1.1.69-71). Understandably, no-one asks Antonio either to dine or to “laugh.” Gratiano, who perhaps uniquely among Antonio’s acquaintances, actually “love[s]” him, is the only one who promises to continue his conversation with the merchant “after dinner” (1.1.87, 1.1.103-04). Later we see that Antonio is not involved in the masque, but busies himself solemnly with his efforts to expedite Bassanio’s departure (2.6.62-66).

In these ways Shakespeare covertly endorses Gratiano’s view that the “opinion” which Antonio fishes for with his “melancholy bait” is a poor substitute for the warm-blooded interactions which provide genuine fulfilment (1.1.101-02). Even the admiration of the Christian community, which Antonio has so diligently courted, can easily tip into mockery: Solanio, who is, as we have seen, “wearie[d]” by his solemnity, refers to him at one point as “the good Antonio, the honest Antonio–O that I had a title good enough to keep his name company” (1.1.2, 1.1.54-56, 3.1.12-14). Salerio and Solanio are not without real concern for their friend, as we see at the start of the play, but they betray an impatience with the idealised image which he constantly projects. Significantly, Solanio only warms to Antonio when the latter allows himself to vent, in however indirect a manner, the passionate desires which lurk beneath his pious restraints: the merchant “turn[s] his face” and “put[s] his hand behind him” to “wr[i]ng Bassanio’s hand” as the latter is departing for Belmont, but in the process of hiding his grief from his beloved in this typically self-effacing manner, he inadvertently shows Salerio that his eyes are in fact “big with tears” (2.8.46-49). It is Salerio’s account of this incident which finally convinces Solanio, who had previously been mystified by the merchant’s obfuscations, that Antonio “only loves the world for” Bassanio, and inspires him to embark on a compassionate mission to “find him out and quicken his embraced heaviness with some delight or other” (2.8.50-53).

As noted above, Bassanio himself invites Salerio and Solanio to “laugh” in the opening scene, and has arranged to have dinner with Gratiano and Lorenzo, but, unlike Gratiano, makes no such plans to see Antonio in the future. His remark that he “owe[s] the most in money and in love” to Antonio could be seen as an inadvertent admission that he is bound to his friend primarily by his financial obligation, particularly as it is a prelude to his attempt to borrow more money (1.1.130-52). Rather than appealing to Antonio as a friend, or even interacting with him with any degree of spontaneity, he delivers a carefully prepared speech which, as we have seen, essentially presents the putative loan as a business venture (1.1.140-76). He subsequently tells Portia that Antonio is “the dearest friend to me,” but twenty lines later she brings out the ambiguity of this word: “since you are dear bought, I will love you dear” (3.2.292, 3.2.313). Just as Gratiano might have predicted, Antonio’s endeavours to be seen as “the kindest man, the best condition’d and unwearied spirit in doing courtesies,” have merely secured Bassanio’s high “opinion” rather than establishing a truly intimate connection: Bassanio praises him for possessing more of “the ancient Roman honor…than any that draws breath in Italy” (1.1.102, 3.2.292-96). This is not to deny that he feels deeply grateful to Antonio, but only to point out that, in Shakespeare’s scheme, true intimacy must be based on a balanced exchange of such “courtesies.” Antonio does not see that true friends must show their neediness as well as their care.

Whereas Antonio strives to practise an unrelenting self-denial, Portia is self-assertive– “so is the will of a living daughter curb’d by the will of a dead father” (1.2.24-25)–and unrestrained: she ignores the “instructions” of “divine[s],” for “the brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree” (1.2.12-21). However, Portia’s “blood” and “will” lead her to reject her various suitors for superficial and stereotypical reasons; the Frenchman because of his mercurial disposition, the English lord because of his inability to speak Italian or French and his lack of sartorial elegance, the Scotsman because of his spirited aggression, and the German because of his habitual inebriation (1.2.54-91). She dismisses Morocco purely on the grounds that he has “the complexion of a devil,” whatever his inner “condition,” and when he chooses the wrong casket, wishes him “a gentle riddance,” adding, “let all of his complexion choose me so,” regardless of the fact that he leaves with a “griev’d…heart,” having had to promise “never to speak to lady afterward in way of marriage” (1.2.129-31, 2.7.76-79, 2.1.41-42). She attempts to dissuade the thoughtful Arragon from taking the test (see below), and, once he has failed, facilely criticises his “wisdom” and “wit” (2.9.7-18, 2.9.80-81). Bassanio is no doubt preferred simply because he is handsome, white and comports himself in a relatively familiar way.

Portia does not even touch on the vital issue of her suitors’ constancy. Since only four of the six suitors abandon their suit as soon as they learn that they must vow never to marry if they choose the wrong casket, it is possible that two unspecified lovers–in addition to Morocco and Arragon–have changed their mind about returning home, and are still wondering whether to take the test (1.2.100-05, 1.2.123-24; see 2.1.38-42). If so, Portia does not acknowledge their superior commitment. Far from forcing her to surrender to “fortune,” as Portia implies, the casket test represents a careful attempt to provide her with the discrimination which she lacks. It is in fact her own choice which is arbitrary, since it is based entirely on Bassanio’s good looks and relatively familiar manners, whereas the test might have helped her to marry a man whose faith promoted unstinting, selfless care, if she had allowed it run its course (3.2.21).[[12]](#endnote-12) Shakespeare perhaps uses Nerissa’s response to Portia’s dismissal of Arragon to hint at this point: “The ancient saying is no heresy, hanging and wiving goes by destiny” (2.9.82-83). (As we shall see, Nerissa is far from leaving her own marriage to “destiny.”)

Although Portia affects to believe that it is “a sin” to be “forsworn,” in reality she subverts the casket test because she sees it as her “right…” to pursue her desires without constraint (3.2.10-19). No doubt using knowledge derived from the failures of Morocco and Aragon, she orders a song to be played which implicitly warns her beloved not to choose the more superficially attractive caskets, and in which the first three lines all rhyme with “lead” (3.2.63-72).[[13]](#endnote-13) Bassanio’s initial comment makes it clear that he has attended carefully to these clues: “So may the outward shows be least themselves” (3.2.73).

Arguably, the song which Portia uses to guide Bassanio away from the gold and silver caskets also inadvertently functions as an ironic comment on her own situation: after raising the question as to whether “fancy [is] bred…in the heart or in the head,” the lyric concludes that it is “engender’d in the eyes,” and therefore “dies in the cradle where it lies” (3.2.63-72). The corollary is perhaps that in relationships which move beyond sensual “fancy” the head works alongside the heart to build and gauge mutual trust through repeated demonstrations of reciprocal fidelity. Having circumvented her father’s test, which was designed to replicate all the advantages of a prudent courtship, Portia is in danger of becoming one of the “many” who, in the words of the poem concealed in the gold casket, have “sold” their “life” in exchange for “gilded tombs” -although, as we shall see, she herself takes the principle of “giv[ing] and hazard[ing] all” too seriously to be classed among the many characters in the play who succumb to the enticements of the gold casket (2.7.67-69).

Portia’s comparison of Bassanio’s attempt to solve her father’s love test to Alcides’ liberation of Hesione from the sea monster is more fitting than she knows, for the hero’s motive was indeed not love but a desire to secure a reward (3.2.53-60; see below for a full analysis of Bassanio’s motives). She may not be quite as confident as she seems that Bassanio has “much more love” than Hercules, since she inadvertently admits that she will probably view his efforts to solve the riddle of the caskets “with much, much more dismay” than he that actually “mak[es] the fray” (3.2.54, 3.2.61-62).

Portia’s typically extravagant apostrophe to her own passionate self– “be moderate, allay thy ecstasy, in measure rain thy joy, scant this excess”–may thus be taken more seriously than she intends, for she does not know that Bassanio is capable of sustaining the intimacy which she assumes will flow from their mutual attraction (3.2.111-14). Unlike Juliet, who immediately wishes to revoke her accidental confession of love, or Rosalind, who methodically institutes her own love tests, or Hermia, who insists that Lysander sleep separately from her after they have eloped, or Perdita, who worries that Florizel’s “resolution cannot hold,” Portia sees no reason to temper her desire for Bassanio, who she seemingly agrees is “best deserving a fair lady” simply on the basis of his appearance and manners (1.2.117-21).[[14]](#endnote-14) It is significant that the level-headed Nerissa berates her mistress for pursuing her desires indiscriminately, arguing that lasting “happiness” is the preserve of those who moderate their desires– “superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer” (1.2.7-9)–and maintaining that the restrictions laid on her by the casket test are designed to ensure that she “rightly love[s]” (1.2.27-33). The contrast between the imprudent Portia and the other heroines listed above, all of whom in their different ways practise a degree of caution and moderation, while remaining equally insistent on their right to make own choice of partner, might suggest that in Shakespeare’s view freedom in matters of the heart should ideally be limited to those who are capable of exercising self-control.

Portia has thoroughly absorbed the idea that it is admirable “to give and hazard all” for love, as is shown by the extravagance of her wish that her “virtues, beauties, livings, friends” might “exceed account,” so that she could “stand high in [Bassanio’s] account” (3.2.155-57). In her impatience to appeal to Bassanio’s “fancy,” she dwells particularly on her desire to be “a thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,” while reminding her beloved that he will be the master of “this house, these servants,” and offering him enough money to repay Antonio’s debt twelve times over (3.2.150-54, 3.2.170-71, 3.2.298-308). The very fact that Portia can display her beauty and material generosity so quickly and easily might remind us that these qualities are not necessarily useful in promoting the patient exchanges of care upon which constant attachments are generally founded. Neither lover can yet trust the other, since neither has “sweat[ed]” to demonstrate their constancy, as Gratiano is forced to do with Nerissa (3.2.203-05). We may infer from the fact that Portia makes no further reference to her “friends” or “virtues” that she does not yet appreciate that true friendships can only be formed by consistently exercising “virtues” like wisdom, courage, moderation and justice, all of which involve restraining one’s immediate desires (see 3.2.156). Her impetuous, lavish offers create an ominous imbalance in the couple’s emotional transactions. Figuring herself as “an unlesson’d girl, unschool’d, unpractis’d,” she professes a desire to “learn” everything from “her lord, her governor, her king,” before she has any evidence that Bassanio is willing or able to teach her anything of true value (3.2.149-67).

The above argument is by no means intended to imply that Portia would be incapable of playing her part in a deep and constant intimacy. Indeed, her insistence on “giv[ing] and hazard[ing] all” encourages her to show the sort of passionate generosity which tends to catalyse such intimacies.[[15]](#endnote-15) She succeeds in winning a loyal friend in Jessica, while Nerissa is clearly devoted to her (3.5.73-83, 3.2.206-08). When Bassanio learns of the threat to Antonio’s life, she immediately sympathises with him, noting that the letter which he has received “steals the color from [his] cheek,” and demands that she be allowed to share his concerns: “I am half yourself, and I must freely have the half of any thing that this same paper brings you” (3.2.243-50). This intense sympathy, which soon drives her to undertake the task of saving Antonio’s life, shows that her attraction to Bassanio has already triggered a deep desire to unite with her beloved. She cannot trust him fully yet, but she senses that trust may only be established through diligent, sympathetic care. Portia’s fault lies in her easy assumption that her other “half” will reciprocate her generosity. Qualifying an earlier point, we may now see that the imperative inscribed on the lead casket is indeed partly rooted in the innate desire to care for beloveds; its artificiality consists purely in its insistence that this care should be unconditional.

As with Antonio, however, the image of unstinting generosity which Portia projects is misleading, since her various offers are in fact all attempts, however inadequate and unacknowledged, to set in train what one might call the transactions of love. She clearly understands this point herself on some level, since she twice professes a desire to “stand high in [Bassanio’s] account” (3.2.155-57). However, Shakespeare implies that Portia does not yet appreciate that truly passionate attachments demand a disciplined reciprocity of care, which needs to be monitored cautiously in the early stages of a relationship, precisely because not all beloveds can be relied upon to requite devotion. Her remark that there must be “an egall yoke of love” and “a like proportion of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit” between Antonio and Bassanio, just as she imagines there is between herself and her beloved, shows a nascent understanding that the exchanges of care upon which deep intimacies are founded need to be equitable. Ironically, however, the true similarity between Antonio and Portia is that both characters are involved in a highly inequitable relationship with their beloved (3.4.11-18).

As with Antonio, there are hints that the determination to “give and hazard all” at every turn which distorts Portia’s judgement is rooted in self-love, albeit of a highly sublimated variety. She admits that in comparing her own “manners” and “spirit” to those of Antonio she has “come…too near the praising of myself” (3.4.11-23). Like Antonio, she aspires to a Christ-like generosity of spirit, declaring that she is determined to “purchas[e] the semblance of my soul…from out the state of hellish cruelty (3.4.20-21).[[16]](#endnote-16) Although her pride usually reinforces her habitual efforts to display this generosity, she also vents it directly at times: she is sure that she will “prove the prettier fellow” when she and Nerissa are disguised as men, and relishes the chance to imitate a youth who boasts about his conquests, just as she clearly enjoys the opportunity to denigrate her foreign suitors (3.4.60-78). The contrast between Portia’s boastfulness and the shame which Jessica shows when she is forced to disguise herself as a man suggests that, compared to Judaism and other religions which primarily value modesty and obedience to a binding set of laws, Christian doctrine might ultimately have the effect of liberating self-regard as well as the “blood” (2.6.34-44; see below).

Having said all this, Portia does take some prudent steps to secure at least a basic return for all her lavish advances. She asks her beloved “what treason there is mingled with your love,” and then, when he reassures her, expresses a justifiable worry that “men enforced,” presumably in this case by sexual and economic motives, might “speak any thing” (3.2.26-33). She gives Bassanio a ring to symbolise his constancy, the ceding of which would “presage the ruin of your love, and be my vantage to exclaim on you,” and at least ensures that he marries her before she attempts to pay off Antonio’s debt (3.2.171-74, 3.2.303-08). Despite her apparent confidence in Bassanio’s “manners” and “spirit,” and in the power of freely given love, Portia thus quite naturally allows herself to be protected to some extent by social institutions which have traditionally imposed artificial restrictions on desire with the aim of reinforcing the innate need for constancy. However, in a manner that foreshadows the individualism of post-Christian, liberal regimes (see below), she attaches more significance to the personal commitment represented by her gift of a ring than to the sacrament of marriage, which she actually approaches quite casually– “First go with me to church and call me wife”–while even her presentation of the ring is introduced in a relative clause, appended loosely to a speech which focuses primarily on the fabulous wealth and power that she is investing in Bassanio (3.2.303, 3.2.167-74).

In the courtroom Portia initially adopts the same lofty approach to retributive justice as to transactional models of attachment. She famously informs Shylock that “the quality of mercy is not strain’d, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” (4.1.184-85). Ultimately, mercy derives its transcendent value from the fact that “in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation,” which means that we should all “pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy” (4.1.199-202). Here Shakespeare exposes the Christian doctrine which underpins Portia’s liberalism[[17]](#endnote-17): to allow love to be regulated by a judgement as to either a culprit’s or a beloved’s deserts is to ask more of that individual than Christ himself, who is presented as responding to fallen humanity with infinite generosity. These remarks indicate that Portia’s passionate generosity, which seems entirely spontaneous, has in fact been shaped by a habitual belief in the power of unstinting love to overcome all obstacles. The sincerity of this belief is evident in the way that she gives Shylock several chances to show mercy, rather than immediately exposing the flaw in his case (4.1.182-261).[[18]](#endnote-18) There is no doubt that the liberal ethos to which Portia has become habituated by her Christian upbringing exercises a pervasive influence on her approach to relationships.

However, Portia’s insistence that mercy should simply be allowed to flow freely without “strain…,” like the “gentle rain,” is contradicted, not only by her instruction that Shylock “must…be merciful,” which, as the Jew himself notes, is phrased as a “compulsion,” but by her subsequent behaviour, which does indeed implicitly represent mercy as a pressing obligation (4.1.182-86). Although Portia claims at first that the reliance of postlapsarian humanity on God’s redemptive mercy should simply “teach” Shylock to “render” mercy, the harsh judgement which she delivers after he has repeatedly refused to soften his callousness reflects her underlying conviction that fallen man is in fact dutybound to strive to emulate Christ’s generosity, since he cannot repay Him in any other way (4.1.233-42, 4.1.260-62, 4.1.321-63). Arguably, in the Christian scheme, all faults may be humbly forgiven apart from a failure to show humility and forgiveness.

After implying that she is merely attempting to “teach” Shylock to allow the “gentle rain” of mercy to flow, Portia thus goes on not only to punish him for refusing to be merciful, but to impose precisely a “strain’d” “compulsion” on him to give Antonio half his wealth (4.1.201-02, 4.1.183-84, 4.1.352-53). Later, she perhaps hopes to gloss over this inconsistency by asking Antonio himself whether he is willing to temper the Duke’s judgement with mercy; however, it is noticeable that she then makes no protest against the severe punishments which the merchant proposes (4.1.378-93).[[19]](#endnote-19) The forfeits which Portia imposes on Shylock for defaulting on the overarching obligation to be merciful seem to her perfectly just, although they involve denying him even his principal: “for, as thou urgest justice, be assur’d thou shalt have justice more than thou desir’st” (4.1.315-16, 4.1.336-44). Any mercy that he might be granted must now indeed be thoroughly “strain’d”: Shylock is first told to kneel “down therefore, and beg” for his life after Portia’s verdict, and then informed that only a display of “humbleness” might allow him to keep some of his estate (4.1.363-72).[[20]](#endnote-20)

In this way, justice is shown to be the irreducible, fundamental principle from which even Christians themselves ultimately derive their apparently overriding insistence on the primacy of mercy. Portia illustrates an inconsistency which, Shakespeare implies, lies at the heart of Christian doctrine, since, while presenting “salvation” as transcending “justice,” she naturally feels that it deserves a proportionate response.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Antonio’s behaviour towards Shylock in act 4, scene 1 parallels Portia’s in many ways. The punishment which he demands for Shylock is from one point of view even harsher than the duke’s original sentence, although it might at first seem to be more merciful: whereas the latter would have allowed the Jew to maintain complete control over half of his estate minus a fine, Antonio rescinds the fine, but radically limits this control, since he insists with an unusually transparent vindictiveness that Shylock should will all his wealth to “the gentleman that lately stole his daughter” (4.1.370-90).[[22]](#endnote-22) He refuses to accept the other half of Shylock’s wealth, but offers to keep it “in use,” so that Lorenzo might receive additional assets after the Jew’s death. (Ironically, this would presumably require further dealings with the money lenders.) This offer might seem typically generous to the court, the audience and even to Antonio himself, and indeed it does underline the seriousness of the merchant’s ongoing effort to eschew covetousness, but on the deepest level I would suggest that it is motivated primarily by his natural desire to punish Shylock for threatening his life: he surely understands on some level that the last thing the Jew would want to do is to reward Lorenzo for eloping with his daughter. It is typical of Antonio to present what is perhaps his most vindictive demand as an expression of ardent piety: he requests that Shylock should be forced to “become a Christian” (4.1.387).[[23]](#endnote-23)

Antonio’s natural righteous anger, like his expectation that Bassanio should show a gratitude commensurate to the care which he has received, cannot ultimately be suppressed, but is instead disguised and distorted by his ongoing effort to imitate Christ’s selfless love. His sanctions are more generous than the Duke’s only in material terms; in emotional or spiritual terms his punishment is far more severe than simple justice would demand. Apparently, the attempt to substitute a passionate, loving heart for a code of equity may generate all sorts of injustices.

Like Portia, Antonio can doubtless only go as far as he does towards liberating his natural urge to punish Shylock because he considers the Jew to be beyond the pale. Right from the start, he eschews any hint of warmth in his dealings with Shylock, insisting that their transaction remain coldly functional, just as he imagines Jews would normally wish it to be: “for when did friendship take a breed for barren metal of his friend” (1.3.133-34). Quite apart from pointing to the power of religion to exacerbate tribal tensions (see below), the sharp contrast between the manner in which Antonio conducts his transaction with Shylock and the unstinting generosity which he shows Bassanio, and indeed many others within the Christian community, confirms that the Christian willingness to “give and hazard all” is, despite appearances, naturally regulated by an overarching conception of justice. Portia and Antonio assume that the only true crime is to refuse to imitate Christ’s humble generosity, as Shylock does not only when he demands interest in return for his loans, but when he asks the court, “What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?” or when he declares that he will “not be made a soft and dull-ey’d fool to shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield to Christian intercessors” (4.1.89, 3.3.14-16).[[24]](#endnote-24)

Returning to Portia, we can see that she is as reluctant to admit that she expects Bassanio to requite her care as she is to acknowledge that she considers mercy to be a duty. Swayed, no doubt, by her habitual distaste for anything that smacks of the transactional, Portia initially wishes to gain nothing in return for her defence of Antonio except for the satisfaction of having extended her love freely, for “he is well paid that is well satisfied” and her “mind was never yet…mercenary” (4.1.415-18). Nevertheless, it is likely that she has been brooding for a while on her husband’s remark that he would give up “life itself, my wife, and all the world” to free his friend, having initially limited herself to declaring that his “wife would give [him] little thanks for that if she were by,” but has been endeavouring to repress her natural jealousy (4.1.282-89; see 4.1.445-48 for Portia’s ambivalence on this issue). (It is perhaps this partially repressed jealousy which leads her to insist that Shylock’s putative fine should be “for the state, not for Antonio”: 4.1.373). It is only as an afterthought, and with Bassanio’s own inadvertent prompting, that she decides to test her beloved’s resolve to retain the ring which symbolises his fidelity, yet once she has released herself from the restraints of her habitual liberalism, she seems to experience a mounting urge to establish the extent to which her love is requited: “and now, methinks, I have a mind to it” (4.1.427-33). As in the courtroom, her innate sense of justice ultimately overrides her adherence to the conventional principle of “giv[ing] and hazard[ing] all.”

Portia’s punishment of Bassanio for underrating her “virtue” and “worthiness” in ceding the ring, although presented as a jest, and consisting of threats which ultimately remain unfulfilled, in fact represents a serious effort to show him that he is now involved in a solemn contract, where there might be severe consequences for any failure to live up to his obligations (5.1.199-200). Not only would she “ne’er come in [his] bed,” but she would behave as “liberal[ly]” as she affects to imagine Bassanio has towards the recipient of the ring: just as Bassanio has apparently preferred this “doctor” to herself, so she would deny the doctor neither her “body nor [her] husband’s bed” (5.1.189-91, 5.1.223-33). Portia is at last behaving naturally as she instigates her own love test, censures Bassanio for failing it, and then threatens to retaliate. These threats show again that, although Christians are encouraged to feel that they can dispense with retributive justice, they instinctively fall back upon it whenever the informal imperatives of love in which they place such faith are not respected. As Shylock maintains, if a Christian is wronged, “what is his humility? Revenge” (3.1.68-69).

As with Antonio, however, Portia’s adherence to the central Christian injunction to show unconditional love prevents her from employing any direct, timely or indeed adequate means of ensuring that her love is requited. Her imagined punishment itself reflects her liberal values in a manner that weakens the gravitas which she is trying to assume in order to rebuke Bassanio: Portia has no right to reprimand Gratiano for speaking “grossly” when he exclaims at apparently being “cuckold[ed]” before consummating his marriage, for it is she who introduced this idea, even if she avoided the indelicate phrase (5.1.265-66). She no doubt manages to avoid thinking of herself as adopting what she would see as a basely transactional approach to her marriage by ultimately presenting her own belated love test as a jest. The bantering manner in which she asks Antonio to stand as “surety” for Bassanio’s fidelity no doubt allows her to avoid admitting to herself that her husband will always feel bound to prioritise his friend’s demands over her own (4.1.254-56).

In sum, Shakespeare’s implication is that Portia has trusted too much to the informal imperatives of love, presumably proceeding on the naive assumption that fellow Christians are bound to value unstinting generosity. If she had not circumvented her father’s love test in the first place, she might never have married a man who does not love her, and whose “prodigal” behaviour has left him so thoroughly indebted to Antonio. Even subsequently, she could have exerted herself much more forcefully to impress upon Bassanio the seriousness of their marital contract. Overall, Shakespeare shows through Portia’s relationship with Bassanio that the effort to “give and hazard all” ultimately tends to endanger the exchanges of care upon which trusting attachments must be founded. [[25]](#endnote-25)

Portia’s wilfulness is underpinned by a secularised version of the lead casket injunction, which perhaps foreshadows the prevailing ethos of modern liberal regimes. The restrictions which her father attempted to place on her desires, which might have ensured that she “rightly love[d],” are themselves weakened by their reliance on a principle which celebrates freely given love rather than self-restraint (1.2.30-33). She differs from Antonio in that she ignores the “instructions” of “divine[s],” yet, as her celebration of Christian mercy implies, resembles him in her sincere adherence to the principle of “giv[ing] and hazard[ing] all,” which not only encourages her to give herself impetuously to Bassanio in the first place, but subsequently impedes her natural efforts to ensure that her generosity is requited (1.2.12-21).

Thus, Shakespeare hints that, both in its traditional and its modern, secularised form, the central Christian teaching tends to disrupt attachments. The elliptical nature of the inscription on the lead casket is itself significant: whereas “hazard[ing]” is normally undertaken for some ulterior purpose, sincere Christians must love unconditionally. Both Portia and Antonio form an inequitable relationship with Bassanio precisely because they have absorbed this teaching. Antonio interprets it to mean that he should care for Bassanio while suppressing his own passionate needs, while Portia, trusting entirely to her individual “will” and “blood,” simply assumes on the basis of very little evidence that if she provides for her beloved with sufficient generosity, he will respond in kind.

The parallels between the two characters are highlighted by the way in which they both complain of “wear[iness]” in their opening lines (1.1.1-2, 1.2.1-2). They are also rebuked in a similar way by Nerissa and Gratiano respectively, who both argue that their depression stems from an egregious self-regard (1.1.79-102, 1.2.3-9). Shakespeare uses Gratiano in particular to hint that the self-regard of serious Christians, and, one might add, of post-Christian liberals, may be sublimated by their habitual beliefs in a manner that stunts their capacity to form fulfilling attachments.[[26]](#endnote-26) It is significant that the only two characters in the play who strive to adhere to the doctrine of unconditional love are shown to be in danger of lapsing into an ennui which perhaps verges on nihilism.

The ennui is a sign that the lead casket imposes impossible demands. As a result, it cannot maintain its coherence, but tends to dissolve into the silver. Both Portia and Antonio deliver a form of retribution rather than mercy in the courtroom, and both eventually attempt, however inadequately, to “get as much as [they] deserve…” from Bassanio. It is not surprising that Christian principles tend ultimately to lose their coherence in this way, for while the silver casket is as deeply rooted in innate desire as the gold, the leaden injunction to give in a spirit of pure altruism is primarily conventional. (To the extent that it is natural, it could be said to abstract the innate urge to make generous advances in order to initiate intimate attachments from the reciprocal interactions which ultimately secure such attachments.) Nevertheless, while Portia and Antonio’s efforts to gain a return for their devotion confirm that it is impossible to dispense entirely with a transactional model of relationships, the inadequacy of these efforts indicates that conventional beliefs nevertheless have the power to stunt and radically distort the equitable exchanges of care upon which deep attachments must be founded. Both these characters seem fated to oscillate perpetually between the lead casket and the silver.

# The Gold Casket: to “Gain What Many Men Desire”

The portrayal of the Prince of Morocco indicates that the gold casket symbolises self-love and immoderate sensuality. Before choosing the gold casket, Morocco boasts of the superior intensity of his passion compared to “creature[s] northward born;” of his attractiveness in the eyes of “the best-regarded virgins of our clime;” of his Herculean valour; and of his “birth…fortunes…graces, and…qualities of breeding” (2.1.1-11, 2.1.24-35, 2.7.32-33). He rejects the lead and silver caskets purely because the metals are comparatively “base” (2.7.49-55). In contrast with Arragon, his passion and ambition are actively reinforced by the reflection that “all the world desires” Portia (2.7.38-47; compare 2.9.31-33). Quite apart from his urge “to kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint,” his focus on “see[ing]” and “view[ing]” Portia hints that his love is primarily sensual (2.7.39-47; see below). His self-regard appears to have flourished freely in the absence of the restraints of an organised religion -we learn that he has resisted Islamic invaders on several occasions (2.1.24-26). Whereas the lead and silver caskets represent instilled codes of behaviour–although, as we have already seen, the impulse to “get as much as [one] deserves” is also innate–the gold casket symbolises precisely the self-regarding and sensual elements within human nature which these codes generally seek to sublimate or restrain.

Launcelot seems to epitomise the life style represented by the gold casket. Flushed with success after being hired by Bassanio, he boasts of his extraordinary abilities and of his multiple sexual escapades: “fifteen wives…Aleven widows and nine maids is a simple coming-in for one man” (2.2.156-67). Later, he implicitly absolves himself of any responsibility for impregnating a woman who is identified only as “the Moor” (3.5.37-42). The injunction to “give and hazard all” only affects him to the extent that it side-lines the ten commandments and liberates his self-love and sensual desire. It is fitting that his namesake was a Christian knight who was famous for his intemperance.

His mockery of Shylock’s simple faith in premonitions implies that, unlike his master, he does not believe in an immanent God who guides the virtuous, and perhaps punishes sinners in this world as well as the next: “it was not for nothing that my nose fell a-bleeding on Black Monday last at six a’ clock i’ th’ morning, falling out that year on Ash We’n’sday” (2.5.16-27). Like many of his peers, his faith exerts no visible constraints on his conduct, and in fact amounts to little more than a proud sense of his Christian identity, which encourages him to stigmatise all those whom he imagines to be beyond the reach of salvation (see for instance 2.2.1-32, 3.5.1-26). The faithless Launcelot respects no code of duty which might restrain his self-regard. Although he claims to have been “famish’d in [Shylock’s] service,” he does not argue with his former master’s subsequent assertion that he has “gurmandize[d]” with him (compare 2.2.106-07, 2.5.3-4). According to Shylock, he is “a huge feeder, snail-slow in profit, and he sleeps by day more than the wild-cat” (2.5.46-48). He seems to have served Shylock “merr[ily]” and “kind[ly] enough” while he considered that it was in his interest to do so, but has been enticed away by his overmastering desire to gain one of Bassanio’s “rare new liveries” (2.3.1-3, 2.5.46, 2.2.107-11). As soon as he knows he is leaving Shylock, he feels free to defy his old master’s “bidding,” while even after he has taken up his new post Lorenzo has to command him four times to “prepare dinner” before he obeys (2.5.6-9, 3.5.46-70).

Shakespeare hints that the fragmentation of Venetian society which Launcelot seems to embody is endemic and self-perpetuating. Launcelot’s father does not know where Shylock’s house is, or indeed whether his son still works there, let alone how well his master and he “agree” (2.2.39-47, 2.2.99-101). Enough time has elapsed since Old Gobbo last saw Launcelot for him to be unsure whether his son is “alive or dead,” and to believe that his beard may have grown as long as a horse’s tail (2.2.60-72, 2.2.93-99). There is a suggestion that Gobbo himself has previously been distracted from his domestic commitments by various sexual affairs, just as Launcelot himself refuses to take responsibility for his child (2.2.16-18, 3.5.37-42). We may infer that Launcelot has been deprived of the enduring family relationships which might have encouraged him to prioritise his attachments over his self-regard. As he himself protests, it is unlikely that he has really supported his father in the way that Gobbo claims (perhaps sentimentally, when under the impression that his son is “deceas’d”): “Do I look like a cudgel or a hovel-post, a staff, or a prop?” (2.2.60-69). These indignant questions suggest that his self-regard could never allow him to reduce himself so far as to play the humble role of dutiful son. The cruel jest in which Launcelot convinces his father that he is dead is only the clearest of several indications that the relationship between the two is by no means deeply affectionate.

Nevertheless, even Launcelot is not completely alienated from all attachments, or from the imperatives which they naturally impose. His pretence that he is dead seems to be a way of punishing Gobbo for his neglect, as is suggested by his remark that “murder cannot be hid long; a man’s son may, but in the end truth will out” (2.2.78-80). He may indeed consider that this trick delivers a form of poetic justice, since it depends on Gobbo’s inability to recognise his own son’s voice. After he has punished his father for his long absences, albeit only in this bantering manner, he feels moved to kneel and ask for his blessing (2.2.78-98). We may infer from the fact that Gobbo mistakes his son’s hair for his beard that Launcelot’s feelings run sufficiently deep to keep him kneeling for a while even after being told to “stand up.”

Gobbo himself also seems to have been belatedly swayed by a desire to engage in the exchanges of care which nurture attachments: he presumably procures a peace offering in the shape of “a dish of doves” for his son’s employer with the aim of re-establishing a paternal relationship which has previously been fragile and sporadic (2.2.135-36). There is real concern in his repeated questions regarding Launcelot’s relationship with his employer: “How dost thou and thy master agree…How ‘gree you now?” (2.2.99-101). Perhaps, ironically, his loss of sight has enabled him to see the insubstantiality of the gratifications afforded by self-love and sensual attraction, which, as we shall see, the play regularly associates with superficial appearances.

However, the disruption which Old Gobbo’s former lack of “honest[y]” has caused is not so easily rectified: the dish of doves which he brings–for which incidentally he is never thanked by his graceless son–cannot atone for paternal neglect; nor can the trick which Launcelot plays on his father deliver proportionate retribution for this neglect. Although Launcelot asks for Gobbo’s blessing in a straightforwardly affectionate manner, he is “glad” to see him primarily because his presence and the gift which he has brought might help him to gain the “rare new liver[y]” which he craves (2.2.107-12). Launcelot cannot bring himself to respond trustingly to his father’s loving advances, as is shown by the way in which he “becomes embroiled with him in a contest over how to sue for Bassanio’s favor,” even after the two have apparently become reconciled (2.2.119-41).[[27]](#endnote-27) He interrupts partly because he is so impatient to advance himself, and partly because he cannot allow himself to be reduced to the status of “a poor boy” -it is telling that, rather than welcoming his father’s sympathetic concern, he merely bridles proudly at this affectionate diminutive (2.2.122-24).

In sum, Launcelot and Gobbo’s gestures towards reprisal and expiation respectively are not sufficient to clear the way for a thoroughly trusting and harmonious relationship, based on a humble exchange of care, since they are not proportionate to the neglect which originally disrupted the relationship. Both Gobbo and Launcelot are ultimately victims of a doctrine which has liberated desire and self-love from any conventional restraint, while at the same time suggesting that faults which are in reality deeply divisive may easily be forgiven.

Bassanio inadvertently reveals that he shares Morocco’s priorities when he describes Portia as “richly left, and…fair” before mentioning her “wondrous virtues” (1.1.161-63). He is certainly attracted to her, even if his main motive for courting her is financial. His comparison of her “sunny locks” to a “golden fleece” is the first of several remarks which link sexual desire to the gold casket (1.1.169-70). Portia is surely correct to assume that the inscription on this casket, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire,” refers, at least in part, to physical attraction: the song by which she hopes to steer Bassanio towards choosing the lead casket implicitly identifies the gold casket with a superficial “fancy” that is merely “engend’red in the eyes, with gazing fed” (2.9.24, 3.2.63-69). Ironically, after prudently rejecting the charms of “crisped snaky golden locks” in accordance with this hint, and thus successfully negotiating the casket test, Bassanio himself proceeds to feed his “fancy” in precisely the manner which the song criticises by admiring the “golden mesh” of Portia’s hair, as represented in the portrait concealed within the lead casket (3.2.88-102, 3.2.120-23). His concentration on physical appearance again links him to Morocco, who, as we have seen, implies that he has been drawn to Belmont primarily by his longing “to see,” and again “to view fair Portia” (2.7.41-47).

Bassanio then focuses on the way in which the eyes of this “shadow,” or “counterfeit” of Portia, which he describes as beautiful enough to have blinded the artist, seem to “move…riding on the balls of mine” (3.2.115-18, 3.2.124-29). The imagery used in this passage is strongly reminiscent of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: both plays suggest that sensual desire itself actively invests the physical appearance of the beloved with a magical charm, which can easily blind lovers to the fact that, when considered soberly, such appearances are merely inert “counterfeit[s]” or “shadow[s],” which may be denigrated as abruptly as they are elevated by the whim of sensual “fancy” (see 3.2.67-69). It should be noted at this point that Portia’s own desire, like that of the charmed Demetrius and Lysander, is also “with gazing fed”: she initially provokes Bassanio’s interest by delivering “fair speechless messages” with her “eyes,” and then later describes his “eyes” as having “o’erlook’d…and divided” her, so that she is “one half…yours, the other half yours” (1.1.163-64, 3.2.14-16). The lovers have had little time either to pledge or to demonstrate their mutual fidelity, but are simply attracted by each other’s good looks -and, in Bassanio’s case, as we shall see, not even primarily by those.

Like the image of the golden fleece which runs throughout the play, the gold casket clearly represents the pursuit of wealth and status as well as sensual attraction (1.1.167-76; see also 3.2.241 and the analysis of 5.1.12-14 below). Together, social status and physical beauty seem to form the two central elements which make up the superficial “outside” which “many a man his life hath sold” merely to “behold” (2.7.67-68). As with Morocco, but by contrast with Arragon, Bassanio’s desire for Portia is reinforced by the reflection that the “wide world” knows of her worth, so that “from every coast renowned suitors” pursue her “sunny locks,” which “hang on her temples like a golden fleece” (1.1.167-70). His pursuit of Portia combines sensual desire and worldly ambition in a manner that perfectly illustrates the pervasive influence of the gold casket.

Similarly, the spectacular and “costly” appearance of Bassanio’s train when he first comes to Belmont provides the quintessential example in the play of “glister[ing]” without being “gold,” since he later has to inform Portia that he has “nothing,” and then, later still, and even more reluctantly, that he was “a braggart” even in making this claim, since he is in fact in debt to his friend (2.9.86-95, 2.7.65, 3.2.252-63). (Presumably he was initially hoping to pay Antonio back without even mentioning the debt to Portia, once he was married.) One may infer that there is a tension between what one might broadly term gold casket motives and sincere relationships both from Bassanio’s warning to the passionate and outspoken Gratiano “to allay with some cold drops of modesty [his] skipping spirit,” lest he “be misconst’red” in Belmont “and lose [his] hopes,” and from the latter’s satirical response, which is to reassure him that he will behave with as smoothly hypocritical an appearance of piety and “civility” as his friend could wish (2.2.180-97).

Bassanio needs money primarily to satisfy his desire to distinguish himself: he has “disabled [his] estate, by something showing a more swelling port than [his] faint means would grant continuance” (1.1.123-25).[[28]](#endnote-28) Unlike Antonio, whose self-love is always mediated by his piety, the pride which Bassanio feels after succeeding in the casket test is raw and unvarnished: he compares his exultant state of mind to that of a competitor in a game who has won “applause and universal shout” and “peals of praise” (3.2.141-45). After briefly mentioning his “blood,” or sexual desire, he returns to this theme, comparing the “wild…of joy” which he is experiencing to a “buzzing pleased multitude” celebrating the speech of a “beloved prince” (3.2.175-83). Although Bassanio is sufficiently prudent to choose the lead casket, in reality he is bent on gaining “what many men desire,” namely sexual pleasure and the status which wealth provides.[[29]](#endnote-29) It is relevant to note at this point that Bassanio’s name may be derived from the word “base.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

The ultimate futility of worldly ambition and immoderate sensual desire is symbolised by the death’s head which confronts Morocco when he opens the gold casket, and underlined by the poem contained therein, which declares that “many a man his life has sold but my outside to behold. Gilded tombs do worms infold” (2.7.62-69). Similarly, Portia’s song reminds us that a “fancy” which is purely “engend’red in the eyes, with gazing fed…dies in the cradle where it lies” (3.2.67-70). Thus, Shakespeare indicates that the gratifications which are the object of such fancies are insubstantial and ephemeral. Bassanio himself inadvertently suggests that his concentration on sensual desire is ultimately self-destructive, when he compares Portia’s hair to a “golden mesh,” designed “t’entrap the hearts of men faster than gnats in cobwebs” (3.2.120-123).

Yet Bassanio’s subsequent behaviour implies that the sense of duty which springs naturally from the desire to gain the substantial gratifications afforded by deep attachments may often prove sufficiently powerful to counter the insistent promptings of self-regard. Thus, he feels obliged to interrupt his celebration of his successful completion of the casket task with a promise to requite Portia’s constancy (3.2.183-85). Later, he declares that he would rather buy Balthazar “the dearest ring in Venice” than surrender her ring, which he has vowed neither to “sell, nor give, nor lose” (4.1.434-443). In the last act, he seriously contemplates “cut[ting his] left hand off” for a moment and “swear[ing he] lost the ring defending it,” before resorting to repeated apologies and assurances that he will “never more…break an oath with thee” (5.1.187-248). The vehemence of this aside suggests that his desire to requite Portia’s generous care is absolutely sincere. We may infer that by the end of the play Bassanio is moved by a genuine sense of gratitude and a longing to form a trusting relationship as well as by self-love and physical desire.

Similarly, in his relationship with Antonio, Bassanio’s self-love is from the start moderated by a heartfelt sense of obligation (1.1.130-01). Indeed, his pursuit of Portia is itself partly motivated by a sincere wish to repay his friend for an earlier loan (1.3.146-52). The sincerity of Bassanio’s care for Antonio is shown by his horrified reaction to Shylock’s proposed contract: “You shall not seal to such a bond for me, I’ll rather dwell in my necessity” (1.3.154-55). On the one hand this intervention is sufficiently forceful to have brought the whole matter to an end if Antonio were less determinedly generous, but on the other his desire to regain his former status ultimately overrides his guilt: his final caution to Antonio is in fact relatively weak -“I like not fair terms and a villain’s mind” (1.3.179).[[31]](#endnote-31) Right from the start, Bassanio is thus caught uneasily between his desire to “gain what many men desire” and his feeling that he should give Antonio “as much as he deserves.”

Bassanio is intensely alarmed when he hears that Antonio’s life is in danger: to Portia he looks as if he has received news of “some dear friend dead” (3.2.243-47). He tells her that the letter contains “a few of the unpleasant’st words that ever blotted paper,” adding that “every word in it [is] a gaping wound issuing life-blood,” since it informs him that the man who has been his “kindest” and “dearest friend” is in danger (3.2.250-52, 3.2.265-66, 3.2.292). Again, his guilt and heartfelt concern are clearly rooted in a natural urge to requite the self-denying care of such a friend. Throughout the trial scene Bassanio is desperate to protect Antonio from harm, promising that “the Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all, ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood,” and later that he “will be bound to pay [the debt] ten times o’er, on forfeit of [his] hands…head [and] heart” (4.1.112-13, 4.1.209-12). He offers to sacrifice “life itself, my wife, and all the world” in return for Antonio’s life, and at his friend’s behest eventually gives away the ring which he had promised to cherish forever (4.1.282-87, 4.1.449-54). (It is significant also that, having promised to sleep in “no bed” and eschew all “rest” until he returns to Belmont, he in fact stays for a night at Antonio’s house before departing in the morning: 3.2.324-27, 4.1.454-57). As Bassanio himself puts it later, he feels “enforc’d” to give up the ring: “beset with shame and courtesy, my honor would not let ingratitude so much besmear it” (5.1.216-19). This sort of “honor” has nothing to do with a desire to show “a swelling port,” but rather refers to the duties that arise naturally from attachments, which demand that, wherever possible, friends must strive to requite each other’s care in order to earn a trusting relationship.

The story of Lorenzo parallels that of Bassanio, rather as Portia’s story parallels that of Antonio. He too benefits from Shylock’s gold and advances himself in a manner that is both unscrupulous and duplicitous (2.4.29-31, 3.1.83-87, 3.1.108-112, 2.6.23). He too mentions his prospective wife’s wealth before lauding her virtues, and praises her beauty before her “tru[th]” (2.4.31-34, 2.6.54-55). He too has little opportunity to court her before they are married, which means that, like Bassanio and Portia, neither he nor Jessica have the chance to prove their constancy or gauge that of their partner. Jessica, who at first hardly recognises her beloved’s voice, can only claim that she loves no-one else “so much,” adding “who knows but you, Lorenzo, whether I am yours?” (2.6.26-31).

The shallowness of the couple’s initial attachment is suggested by the very fact that Lorenzo is late for his rendezvous with Jessica. Salerio and Gratiano understand that, although it would normally be a “marvel” that Lorenzo should “out-dwell…his hour, for lovers ever run before the clock,” in this case their friend’s sexual desire has already been thoroughly sated: “Who riseth from a feast with that keen appetite that he sits down?” (2.6.2-19). Lorenzo’s delay also suggests that he has had to remind himself sternly of the financial rewards which are at stake in order to overcome his distaste for a plan that involves not only accepting a Jew as his father, but marrying a woman whom he cannot yet love, while at the same time “play[ing] the thie[f]” (2.6.22-25). (Although Lorenzo habitually sees Shylock as “a faithless Jew,” who is beyond the moral pale, this remark implies that he is nevertheless still troubled by a natural sense of justice even as he prepares to steal his gold and jewels: 2.5.37.)

The attentive reader may appreciate the symbolic significance of Jessica passing Lorenzo a “casket” which she describes as “worth the pains”–presumably because it contains not only ducats but some of the treasure which they subsequently squander on their honeymoon–and then announcing that she will “gild [her]self with some moe ducats” (2.6.33, 2.6.49-50; see 3.1.83-85, 3.1.108-09, 3.1.118-19).[[32]](#endnote-32) At this point in the play, the couple perfectly represent both aspects of the gold casket, since they are motivated simultaneously by sexual desire and self-advancement. Jessica is primarily driven by her ambition to “become a Christian,” while Lorenzo is essentially exploiting her desire to bribe her way into the Christian community by “gild[ing]” herself with ducats (2.3.22, 2.6.49-50). At the same time, Gratiano and Salerio imply that a strong sexual attraction has played its part, since they assume that the couple have already found a way of sleeping together (2.6.5-19).

As with Bassanio, however, Lorenzo’s self-love is naturally tempered by gratitude. As soon as he sees that Jessica is determined to execute the couple’s nefarious plan, he vows to place her in his “constant soul,” since she is “wise…fair…and true…as she hath proved herself” (2.6.52-57). Ironically, Lorenzo’s self-love ultimately places him under obligations which he can only fulfil by practising a degree of self-denial. Later, after implicitly acknowledging that he must lead an “upright” life if he wishes to win Jessica’s love, he first compares himself to Troilus sighing for Cressida and then carefully orchestrates what he hopes will be a romantic scene in order to advance the couple’s intimacy, encouraging Jessica to gaze at the stars to the accompaniment of music (3.5.73-84, 5.1.1-6, 5.1.53-65). These efforts suggest that his gratitude and attraction to Jessica have triggered a genuine longing to transform what was at first essentially a marriage of convenience into a trusting and intimate attachment.

However, the marriage is riven by a deep mutual mistrust: the analogy which Lorenzo draws between himself and Troilus, “sigh[ing]” for his beloved hints at a worry that his new wife might prove to be as fickle as Cressida was in “the Grecian tents,” now that he has given her access to a more liberal culture (5.1.1-6). Lorenzo must know that Jessica’s elopement with him was primarily motivated by her ambition to “become a Christian,” rather than by a wish to be his “loving wife (2.3.22). Even the gratitude which he feels to her for “prov[ing] herself to be “true” in carrying through their unscrupulous plan is countered by the reflection that she only did so by “steal[ing] from the wealthy Jew” (2.6.55, 5.1.14-17). His fundamental distrust of Jessica is shown by his quick assumption that the sadness which she feels in response to “sweet music” might be a sign that she is only “fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils” (5.1.69, 5.1.83-88). [[33]](#endnote-33)

In reality, the coolness that Lorenzo has sensed in Jessica is symptomatic of an inner unease. She compares her anxiety to that of Thisbe when she “did…fearfully o’ertrip the dew, and saw the lion’s shadow ere himself, and ran dismayed away” (5.1.6-9). This analogy not only implies that she loves Lorenzo, but amounts to an appeal for his patient care. Pained by her recalcitrance, however, Lorenzo retaliates by indirectly threatening to desert her in favour of his own race, leaving Jessica begging for him to return, just as Dido repeatedly beckoned to the patriotic Aeneas as he departed from Carthage (5.1.9-12). Whereas this analogy undoubtedly implies that the couple’s cultural differences reinforce their divisions, what follows shows that these differences are not the underlying cause of their rift.

Jessica finally raises the central issue which divides the couple through her comparison of herself to Medea, “gather[ing] the enchanted herbs that did renew old Aeson” (5.1.12-14). In the legend, Medea agrees to use her powers to restore Jason’s father, Aeson, to his youth, because she now regrets the callousness which she displayed towards her own father, Aeetes in helping her lover to steal the golden fleece. [[34]](#endnote-34) The bitter remorse which this allusion exposes is a sign that Jessica cannot ultimately repress her instinctive appreciation of what is due to those who have cared for her. She has hitherto striven to ingratiate herself with her new friends–this probably explains her eager endorsement of Salerio’s stigmatising of Shylock as “keen and greedy” when the couple first arrive in Belmont (3.2.274-90)–but as the play goes on, she shows a pervasive and potentially divisive unease: like Thisbe, she starts at shadows, while “sweet music” simply reminds her of the harmonious state of mind which she has forfeited (5.1.6-9, 5.1.69).[[35]](#endnote-35)

Lorenzo’s response shows that he understands that in comparing herself to Medea Jessica is alluding to the crime which the couple perpetrated against Shylock. However, whereas Jessica’s reference to the legend implies that she wishes to confront this crime and perhaps, like Medea, try to atone for it in some way, Lorenzo strives to distance himself from his own guilt and to avoid any reproaches for “playing the thie[f],” by reminding her that it was after all primarily she who “did…steal from the wealthy Jew, and with an unthrift love did run from Venice, as far as Belmont” -although he manages to soften this attack by appearing to use the phrase “steal from” metaphorically, merely to refer to her secretive elopement (2.6.22, 3.5.83-90, 5.1.14-17). On her part, although Jessica also disguises her true meaning in exactly the same way, she finally responds angrily to his apparently bantering accusations, meting out precisely the reproaches which her husband sought to avoid: she accuses Lorenzo of “stealing her soul with many vows of faith, and ne’er a true one” (5.1.17-20).[[36]](#endnote-36) Thus, the couple’s capacity to deliver the sympathetic care on which deep attachments are founded is degraded by their mutual distrust: the legacy of their elopement is that each suspects the other of being motivated primarily by lust, greed and ambition.

As Bassanio observes, the gold casket represents “outward shows,” which “deceiv[e]…with ornament,” in law, religion, war and sexual relationships (3.2.73-101). Status and physical attraction not only offer insubstantial rewards, but may easily be manipulated since they rely on appearances. Launcelot, Lorenzo and Bassanio are all motivated partly by sexual desire, but first and foremost by a cool determination to exploit their various relationships for the purposes of self-advancement. In the terms of the poem contained in the casket, the gratifications of a “swelling port” are the “gilded tombs,” in order to “behold” which many lives are “sold” (2.7.65-69). In the later conversations between Jessica and Lorenzo, Shakespeare shows how relationships which purport to be intimate may be degraded by the influence of the gold casket. This influence is evident not only in Lorenzo’s veiled fencing with Jessica, as outlined above, but in his forced efforts to court her, which founder on the mutual suspicion engendered by the couple’s original crime (5.1.53-70). This suspicion threatens to hollow out the relationship, reducing it to a gilded surface, since it impedes the exchange of sympathetic care which is the life-blood of any deep attachment (2.6.21-24, 3.5.83-90).

Quite apart from conveying Shakespeare’s critique of Lorenzo’s superficiality, Salerio and Gratiano’s discussion of his tardiness seems itself to typify the decadence of the Christian community, since both characters assume that beneath an artificial pretence of fidelity romantic relationships are primarily driven by a physical “appetite,” which inevitably “dies in the cradle where it lies” (3.2.67-70):

Who riseth from a feast

With that keen appetite that he sits down?

Where is the horse that doth untread again

His tedious measures with the unbated fire

That he did pace them first? All things that are,

Are with more spirit chased than enjoy’d.

How like a younger or a prodigal

The scarfed bark puts from her native bay,

Hugg’d and embraced by the strumpet wind!

How like the prodigal doth she return,

With over-weather’d ribs and ragged sails,

Lean, rent, and beggar’d by the strumpet wind. (2.6.8-19)

The repeated references to the parable of the prodigal son in this speech may remind us of the downgrading of justice which lies at the heart of Christian doctrine. Portia commits “the husbandry and manage of [her] house” to the unscrupulous Lorenzo, who is essentially a thief, while Antonio ensures that the latter profits doubly from his theft through the provisions which he forces Shylock to make in his will (3.4.24-26, 4.1.380-90, 5.1.288-95). Similarly, like the father in the parable, neither Portia nor Antonio explicitly demand that Bassanio, who is himself twice described as “prodigal” in the course of the play, should dutifully requite their generosity (1.1.129, 2.5.15). Antonio encourages Bassanio to borrow from him a second time without feeling any compunction, even though he has not repaid the original loan, while Portia ultimately forgives him both for the duplicity of his initial display of wealth and for the overriding obligation which he has incurred to his friend in staging this display (1.1.127-60). The unconditional generosity exhibited by both these characters will no doubt encourage Lorenzo and Bassanio to continue to expose both themselves and others to “the strumpet wind[s]” of self-love and immoderate sensual desire in a manner that is limited only by their natural sense of justice.

One may infer from these various examples that, paradoxically, the Christian injunction to “give and hazard all” in a spirit of selfless love actually may easily emancipate self-loveand immoderate sensual desire.[[37]](#endnote-37) (This implication is presumably inadvertent on Gratiano’s part, although, as we shall see in the next section, his passionate and reflective nature, which already in this speech seems to be baulking at the futility of submitting himself to the vagaries of “the strumpet wind,” eventually moves him to pursue the more lasting rewards of an “oblig’d faith” with Nerissa: 2.6.5-7). As Portia’s famous speech indicates, it is ultimately the doctrines of original sin and redemption which encourage Christians to elide the crucial distinction between what Jessica refers to as an “upright” life, devoted to a pursuit of the “joys” of trusting intimacy, and a potentially divisive self-regard (4.1.184-202, 3.5.73-78; see below for a full analysis of Jessica’s speech). Shakespeare implies that the natural determination to engage in dutiful, proportionate exchanges of care is often weakened in Christian communities by the belief that, “in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation,” since this leads to the toleration of potentially divisive faults (4.1.199-200).

Thus, Lorenzo behaves in a manner that typifies the Christians in the play when he refuses even to discuss, let alone attempt to atone for, the guilt which he feels for having “play[ed] the thie[f].” He forces Jessica, who wishes to give her “opinion” of him directly (see below), to join him in communicating only through veiled hints, seeming banter, classical allusions and small-talk, begging her to let her reproaches “serve for table-talk; then, howsome’er thou speak’st, ‘mong other things I shall digest it” (3.5.83-90). He attempts to draw a line under the couple’s bitter exchange of classical analogies by declaring lightly that “in such a night did pretty Jessica (like a little shrow) slander her love, and he forgave it her,” whereas Jessica herself would have continued the argument if she had not been interrupted by Portia’s messenger (5.1.20-22; see below). Such a ‘forgiveness’ is bound to be as superficial as Launcelot’s reunion with his father and Portia’s reconciliation with Bassanio. Ironically, Lorenzo’s hope that tender-heartedness will carry the day in the end is actually shown to militate against true tenderness, since, just as intimate relationships demand devoted care, so they necessarily entail a proportionately rigorous expiation of any failure to fulfil this imperative.

As we have seen, Lorenzo, Bassanio and even Launcelot are nevertheless partly restrained in the end by a sense of justice which is generated naturally by their attachments. Even the highly individualistic Launcelot sues for his father’s blessing, having requited him for his neglect, just as Gobbo himself realises that he must show some concern for his son in order to re-establish his paternal relationship. However, just as the relationship between Gobbo and Launcelot cannot easily be healed, since neither has previously exerted himself to lay the foundations of a trusting attachment, so, despite their mutual gratitude and nascent attachment, Lorenzo and Jessica seem fated to continue to view each other with deep distrust, since each knows that the other’s original motives for engaging in the relationship were primarily self-regarding. Similarly, Bassanio’s initial pursuit of wealth and status seems likely to thwart his desire to gain fulfilment through a trusting relationship, since this pursuit has divided him from Portia, who will no doubt continue to suspect his motives, and bound him instead to Antonio, whom he deeply admires, but who, for all the reasons given above, is incapable of sharing a truly intimate friendship.

Overall, Bassanio and Lorenzo, who, unlike Launcelot perhaps, are capable of forming intimate attachments, are caught between their self-regard and their natural desire to provide the care which might establish a relationship based on mutual trust, or in other words, between the gold and the silver caskets. There is bound to be a pervasive, enduring tension between these two urges, since both are powerful, natural motives. At the same time, however, if the above argument is correct, the conventional injunction to “give and hazard all” itself tends to generate the conditions in which self-love and sensual desire may dominate, which means that the decadence of Venice is attributable as much to the influence of the lead casket as the gold. Overall, the natural desire of almost all of the Christian characters to form truly intimate relationships is thwarted in some way or other by the leaden injunction: whereas it prevents Portia and Antonio from insisting that their assiduous care is requited, it encourages Lorenzo and Bassanio to believe that they can establish a deep attachment without providing such care in the first place.

# The Silver Casket: to “Get as much as [one] Deserves”

In Jessica and Lorenzo’s last conversation Shakespeare uses the images of music and light to explore the unobtrusive but inexorable influence exerted by deep attachments. Music is a fitting image for such attachments, since each performer can only satisfy the instinctive pleasure which both they and their audience take in “sweet harmony,” or the “concord of sweet sounds,” by coordinating their performance carefully (5.1.57, 5.1.84). The music of the spheres–significantly referred to here as the “harmony…in immortal souls”–to which Lorenzo directs Jessica’s attention before Portia’s musicians arrive, provides a particularly apt image for the pervasive and enduring power of love, which is implicitly contrasted both with the insubstantial gratifications of self-love and with a sensual “fancy” that “dies in the cradle where it lies” (5.1.58-65, 3.2.68-69).[[38]](#endnote-38)

Shakespeare also hints at this power in his portrayal of the “light…burning in [Portia’s] hall,” which welcomes her home: “How far that little candle throws its beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world” (5.1.89-91). This remark might remind us that Portia’s mission to protect Antonio–which is both bold and fairly arduous, since it involves travelling to Venice, mastering some fairly intricate aspects of Venetian law and planning a forensic strategy–is entirely inspired by her desire to unite with Bassanio as closely as possible, which, as we have seen, impels her to observe in minute detail how the letter that informs him of his friend’s predicament “steals the color from [his] cheek” (3.2.243-50). Like the candle, this sympathy naturally “throws its beams” beyond Bassanio to “the bosom lover of my lord” (3.4.10-21). It is significant that Portia fancifully portrays the break in the moonlight which allows her to see the candle-light so clearly as caused by “the Moon sleep[ing] with Endymion”: Selene’s request that Zeus put Endymion into a never-ending sleep so that she could visit him every night provides a fitting image for the calm, unobtrusive, yet absolutely persistent influence of intimate attachments (5.1.109-10). (Lorenzo’s remark that “the man that hath no music in himself” must have a spirit which is “dull as night,” and “affections dark as Erebus” invites the attentive reader to synthesize the two symbols that dominate this passage: 5.1.83-87).

However, it is also significant both that the candle which Portia and Nerissa now see, which is clearly a mild light, despite its far-reaching effects, was previously obscured by moonlight and that the music which Lorenzo has ordered to be played “sounds much sweeter than by day,” when even the song of the nightingale would normally be lost amidst the general din (5.1.92-108). Similarly, Lorenzo tells Jessica that, “whilst this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear” the “harmony…in immortal souls” -just as, to draw the images of light and music together, one cannot see the stars which generate this harmony by daylight, or hardly, perhaps, even when there is a full moon (5.1.63-65). I would argue that both these images are used partly to provide subtle reminders that deep attachments may often be drowned out, at least for a while, by the vivid, but ephemeral gratifications of self-love and sensual desire. It is no coincidence that it is during Portia and Nerissa’s conversation that the candle, and presumably therefore the stars, are most clearly visible, whereas moonlight dominates the sky both during Jessica and Lorenzo’s conversation and when Bassanio arrives (5.1.1,5.1.54). It is significant also, perhaps, that Bassanio’s first impulse is to offer fulsome praise for Portia’s beauty, which he compares to the radiance of the sun. The latter’s peremptory dismissal of his praise once again serves to associate strong light with sensual distraction: “Let me give light, but let me not be light, for a light wife doth make a heavy husband” (5.1.1, 5.1.54, 5.1.124-30).

Shakespeare uses Jessica to show both the influence that such distractions may exert and the unobtrusive, yet persistent counter-influence of deep attachments. Far from being a sign that Jessica is completely unmusical, and therefore only “fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils,” as Lorenzo darkly suspects, the fact that she is “never merry when [she] hear[s] sweet music” is precisely an indication of a passionate nature, albeit one that has been thrown into disharmony (5.1.83-88, 5.1.69). As we have seen, the intense guilt which Jessica feels for betraying her father implies that she is far more deeply attached to him than she has previously acknowledged (see the analysis of 5.1.12-14 above). Her superficial preference for the status and stimulus afforded by the Christian community over the “tediousness of Shylock’s staid “manners” and “sober house” is perfectly compatible with an underlying, unacknowledged attachment to her father (2.3.18-21, 2.3.3, 2.5.36). It is this attachment which doubtless moves her to “make fast the doors,” just as her father repeatedly requested, even as she is “steal[ing] from” him in both senses of that phrase (2.6.49-50, 2.5.28-36, 2.5.53-55).[[39]](#endnote-39)

Jessica has taken her father’s care for granted, just as one might ambient music. She dismisses the security which her home life has offered as “tedious…”–it is significant that she can offer no stronger criticism–only because she is constantly contrasting it to the more sensual and liberal culture by which she is surrounded (2.3.3). The drums, pipes and bright torches of the Christian revellers represent precisely the sort of strident and vivid stimulants which tend at times to overwhelm the unobtrusive harmony and light which flow from close attachments (2.5.29-30, 2.4.5., 2.6.40-44). Only now, after Jessica has exhausted her appetite for such stimulants, can she appreciate how much she has previously relied upon the “sober” domestic life which Shylock oversaw, just as Portia and Nerissa can only focus on the candle-light and the music in the “soft stillness” of a moonless night (3.1.108-12, 3.1.118-19, 5.1.56-57, 5.1.92-101).

In her long eulogy of Portia Jessica reveals a heartfelt understanding of the “joys” which can be derived from relationships that are based on an equitable balance of “merit”:

It is very meet

The Lord Bassanio live an upright life,

For having such a blessing in his lady,

He finds the joys of heaven here on earth,

And if on earth he do not merit it,

In reason he should never come to heaven!

Why, if two gods should play some heavenly match,

And on the wager lay two earthly women,

And Portia one, there must be something else

Pawn’d with the other, for the poor rude world

Hath not her fellow. (3.5.73-83)

Ironically, Jessica is actually far more aware than the friend whom she admires so much that the desire to gain “the joys of heaven here on earth” imposes stern demands, since deep attachments are founded on diligent care, which can only be delivered by lovers who are equally determined to lead “an upright life.” Her idea that something would have to be “pawn’d” to balance Portia’s virtues hints at the need not only to lead such a life oneself, but to gauge the “merit” of prospective partners. Since these “joys” may only be earned through an equitably reciprocated care, they are implicitly associated with the silver casket. This speech contains the clearest formulation in the play both of the ultimate good of a trusting relationship and of the arduous means whereby it may be achieved.

Unlike the doctrine represented by the lead casket, which, as we have seen, is primarily conventional, and the drives represented by the gold, which are entirely natural–although, as we have seen, frequently facilitated by Christian doctrine–the silver casket principle is not only rooted deeply in nature, but may in some cultures be strongly reinforced by habitual opinions. Jessica’s innate sense that “the joys of heaven here on earth” are only available to those who can earn them by “liv[ing] an upright life” is supported by Jewish doctrine, which clearly continues to influence her, despite her expedient conversion to Christianity. She has learnt that those who live a just life will be doubly rewarded, since, in addition to experiencing these earthly “joys,” they will also literally “come to heaven” in the end, while, by implication, the unjust will be punished by divine sanctions as well as by their inability to form truly intimate relationships (3.5.78). Unlike the injunction to “give and hazard all,” the Jewish emphasis on duty and justice reflects the way in which close attachments actually operate, since, as we have seen, they naturally rely on a proportionate interchange of care. By the same token, the commandment to honour one’s parents for their care doubtless reinforces the remorse which Jessica instinctively feels for her filial ingratitude.

The running contrasts between Jessica and the Christians point to the role which conventional principles may play in supporting or, conversely, degrading the restraints which attachments naturally demand. Unlike Portia, who, as we have seen, does not hesitate to circumvent her father’s love test, Jessica remains seriously convinced that filial disobedience is a “heinous sin,” even as she is “steal[ing] from” Shylock (2.3.16-17). In direct contrast with Portia again, who actively relishes the prospect of dressing as a “bragging youth,” Jessica, who has clearly been taught to conduct herself in a modest and restrained manner at all times, is deeply “asham’d” to expose herself in men’s clothing, presumably because it is relatively revealing (2.6.34-44; 3.4.60-78).[[40]](#endnote-40) Although Jessica’s initial betrayal of Shylock of course shows the inevitable limitations of such a habituation–especially in a situation where it may constantly be contrasted with a much more liberal culture–her subsequent remorse points to the enduring power of her training to reinforce the impulses which naturally moderate self-love.

It is significant that it is Jessica who wishes to discuss the problems in her marriage, whereas, although Lorenzo expresses a wish to be as “upright” a husband as Portia is a wife, it is he who strives to divert her from pointing out the faults which have prevented him from earning her trust (3.5.83-90). By contrast with Antonio, who ensures that Lorenzo is ultimately rewarded doubly for the theft which he helped to perpetrate, Jessica wishes to rebuke her husband as harshly as she rebukes herself. It is characteristic of Jessica not only to face her own guilt squarely, as is implied by her comparison of herself to Medea (see above), but to attempt to force Lorenzo to do the same: whereas Lorenzo attempts to draw a line under the increasingly bitter recriminations which the couple exchange in their final conversation by offering a superficial forgiveness, Jessica would have “out-night[ed]” him had she not been interrupted by the messenger (5.1.12-24). Whereas Jessica strives to precipitate the just exchange of recriminations and mutual acceptance of blame which might have cleared the way for a reciprocal forgiveness, Lorenzo consistently thwarts these efforts.

I would argue that the parallel between Jessica’s opening remarks and those of Portia and Antonio actually hints at the contrasts between Judaic and Christian culture: Jessica laments the tedium of her life in her opening lines, but never feels the “weary” ennui from which both the Christian characters suffer, even when she is deeply troubled later on in the play (compare 1.1.1-2, 1.2.1-2 with 2.3.1-3). Whereas the lead casket injunction prevents Portia and Antonio from pursuing fulfilment through a fully reciprocated love, the very bitterness of Jessica’s regret is itself a sign that she is by now sharply aware of “the joys of heaven here on earth” which she has forfeited (3.5.76). Her implicit comparison of her state of mind to that of Medea as she strove to “renew old Aeson” suggests that her guilt is not simply self-lacerating, but may eventually drive her to embark on some sort of atonement, which, although arduous, would be an act of love. If the above interpretation of Shakespeare’s symbolism is correct, it is significant that Jessica is invariably moved deeply, even during the day-time, by the very music which Portia usually ignores (5.1.69, 5.1.99-100). The contrasts between Jessica and the Christians imply that her keen awareness of the aforementioned “joys” is facilitated by her previous habituation to a faith which prioritises “get[ting] as much [one] deserves.”

It is generally Shylock who embodies the silver casket principle most fully in the play. I would argue that Shylock’s initial aim is simply to requite Antonio proportionately for his persistent insults and his generous loans, which bring down the rate of interest. His employment of a colloquial wrestling image to express his righteous indignation–he has a desire to “catch him once upon the hip” in order to “feed fat the ancient grudge”–should certainly not be taken to suggest that his intentions are murderous from the start (1.3.46-47). His early gambits in act 1 scene 4 seem designed merely to humiliate Antonio in fairly trivial ways in return for reviling him and his “bargains, and…well-won thrift” (1.3.48-51). He uses the pretext that Antonio’s “means are in supposition” to demand that the merchant ask for the loan in person–and in public, rather than at Bassanio’s putative dinner–making it clear that he is now the one in control of proceedings by then casually changing the subject: “What news on the Rialto?” (1.3.1-39). He initially affects to ignore Antonio when the latter eventually appears, presumably in the hope that he will feel impelled to adopt the role of a “fawning publican” in his anxiety to secure the loan, and when he refuses to do so, subjects him instead to a long speech in defence of shrewd profit-making, knowing that for the first time the haughty merchant will be forced to listen to him with at least a degree of civility (1.3.41-90).

Shylock appears to be about to offer Antonio a loan at his normal rate of interest when he suddenly breaks off, apparently angered by the merchant’s persistent refusal to moderate his attacks, even in a situation where he might be expected to play the “fawning” supplicant (1.3.97-110). What follows amounts to an exasperated appeal, albeit one which is disguised in characteristic fashion by a self-protective, gruff sardonicism: can Antonio really expect a man whom he is continuing to treat as “a dog” or “a cur” to lend him money in his need (1.3.111-29)? Surely the sense of common justice which naturally governs human relationships would dictate that he should at least treat his putative creditor politely, even if he does not actively express gratitude (1.3.111-29)? Shylock’s appeal might remind us that Antonio is far from respecting this natural standard. Ironically, it is actually the generous Antonio who brusquely suggests that Shylock should add a punitive element to the contract, while it is his apparently purely acquisitive interlocutor who attempts to humanise the situation. As we have seen, rather than following Shylock’s hint that he might now have the grace to soften his proud contempt for usury, Antonio protects his sense of moral superiority by proposing that the Jew should think of himself as dealing with an “enemy,” so that he can “with better face exact the penalty,” if the chance should arise (1.3.130-37).[[41]](#endnote-41) This contrast perhaps suggests that, whereas Antonio’s altruism is inconsistent because it is ultimately driven by pride, the silver casket injunction is rooted in the imperatives which naturally govern attachment -which, as we shall see, is by no means to deny that it may be reinforced by pride.

We may further infer from the fact that it is Antonio who introduces the idea of a harsh penalty that the pound of flesh forfeit is not deeply premeditated on Shylock’s part. It is also worth bearing in mind that at this point the most likely outcome of the bond is that enough of the merchant’s ships will return to enable him to redeem the loan: later in the play Shylock is surprised by the merchant’s “ill luck,” while at the same time determining to exploit it opportunistically (3.1.97-107).[[42]](#endnote-42) All of this is not to argue that the original bond is simply “a merry sport,” as Shylock maintains: if fate should grant him the opportunity, he undoubtedly plans to requite Antonio proportionately for his “hard dealings” by threatening to impose the forfeit for a while in a manner that is calculated to terrify him (1.3.145, 1.3.161).[[43]](#endnote-43)

It is even possible to take seriously Shylock’s claim that he is ultimately endeavouring to “buy [Antonio’s] favor,” and “extend…friendship” by offering an interest-free loan, so that they can “be friends,” and forget their feud (1.3.168, 1.3.138-42).[[44]](#endnote-44) He is perhaps dimly hoping that, in the unlikely event that Antonio’s ventures should all fail, he and his circle of friends might feel intense gratitude when he suddenly reveals, no doubt after a spiteful delay, that he has in reality no intention of imposing the forfeit. Despite his show of belligerence (see below), his eventual, pained decision to accept Bassanio’s invitation to dinner, having refused initially to eat at a house where he might “smell pork,” is in reality probably a sign that he is prepared to extend himself in order to ease relations with the Christian community (2.5.11-16; compare 1.3.32-38; see below). All of this is by no means to deny that Shylock is sufficiently proud of his cultural identity to relish his chance to turn the tables on Antonio by showing him that a Jew is capable of being “kind” and open-hearted, and that it is in fact the Christians who are narrow-minded and suspicious (1.3.142, 1.3.160-62).

If the above analysis is correct, Shylock’s prioritisation of justice leaves room for a guarded generosity, which seems designed to “buy…favor” by “extend[ing]…friendship,” or in other words, to initiate the equitable interchange of care and gratitude that naturally sustains harmonious relationships (1.3.168). Ironically, the offer he makes to Antonio would thus in some ways parallel the merchant’s own offer to Bassanio (the parallel is underlined by the fact that Shylock too is forced to borrow the capital for the loan -1.3.55-58).[[45]](#endnote-45) Both men may be proceeding on the assumption that generosity begets gratitude, but, unlike Antonio, whose relationships, both with his friends and his enemies, are stunted by the pride which he takes in his own apparent adherence to a code of pure altruism, Shylock evaluates what he and others might “deserve” in a measured way–at least until Jessica’s elopement deprives him of his normal self-control–requiting the “hard dealings” of his enemies proportionately, while at the same time still giving himself the scope to make magnanimous advances, in however guarded a manner.

Shylock frequently disguises his feelings by employing “the raw, rueful irony of the outsider.”[[46]](#endnote-46) He goads the Christians throughout the play, in a restrained manner at first, as when he plays on the word “good” to describe Antonio, or frustrates him with his exhaustive account of Jacob’s “woolly breeders,” and grimly later, as when he casually and provocatively compares his antipathy to the merchant to a phobia of “gaping pig[s],” cats and bagpipes (1.3.12-17, 1.3.71-90, 4.1.47-50). The audience may well be as provoked as the court by this casual account of his motives, forgetting that he introduces it by declaring that “[he]’ll not answer” those who ask why he is pursuing an apparently profitless suit so remorselessly, but rather will simply say that it is his “humor”, and concludes it by affirming that he “will not” give any further “reason” (4.1.40-65).

Indeed, Shylock’s habitual principles seem to encourage him to display what one might call a sort of reverse hypocrisy throughout the play: by contrast with the Christian characters, who foreground their generosity while disguising or partially repressing their self-regard, Shylock tends, at least in the first half of the play, to speak more harshly than he acts. He manages to retain a sense of power in his beleaguered situation by consistently adopting what one might term a somewhat misleading rhetoric of retribution: his response to Launcelot’s resignation, which we actually know to have been entirely the latter’s decision–a decision which in reality illustrates the pervasive prejudice to which the Jew is subjected–is to declare, disingenuously, “Drones hive not with me, therefore I part with him” (2.2.1-32, 2.5.48-49). Similarly, he manages to find a way of welcoming Launcelot’s resignation and immediate reemployment by fantasising that his dissolute servant will “help to waste [Bassanio’s] borrowed purse” (2.5.50-51). His comment that he will “go in hate” to Bassanio’s supper, purely “to feed upon the prodigal Christian,” seems equally fanciful (2.5.14-15).[[47]](#endnote-47) He would surely not force himself to leave his house in the face of all his worries, when he has “no mind of feasting forth to-night,” unless he were still hoping against hope that the invitation might offer him a chance to resolve his conflicts with the Christians (2.5.16-18, 2.5.36-39).

If the above analysis is correct, the pound of flesh contract itself, at least as it was originally conceived, may be seen merely as another of the power fantasies by which Shylock habitually relieves his feelings. I would argue that the same applies to his early remarks to Chus and Tubal, as reported by Jessica, to the effect that he “would rather have Antonio’s flesh than twenty times the value of the sum that he did owe him" (3.2.284-290). Shylock’s often misleading stance of uncompromising self-assertion is exploited by Shakespeare to disguise his deeper themes.[[48]](#endnote-48) Thus, readers and audiences are invited to take the pound of flesh contract seriously from the start, and to join the Christian characters in recoiling from the harsh rhetoric which the Jew employs throughout the play.

Shylock’s justice is manifested most clearly in his approach to profit. In rejecting the silver casket, Bassanio describes money–with a glib affectation of lordly indifference–as a “pale and common drudge ‘tween man and man” (3.2.103-04). (Perhaps Shakespeare hints at the disingenuousness of Bassanio’s critique of the economic motive by ensuring that it is drowned out by the song which Portia requests: 3.2.63-107.[[49]](#endnote-49)) Money is indeed integral to the silver casket because it clearly provides a key means of providing an individual with “as much as he deserves” (2.7.7). Shylock explicitly sets a high value on material wealth: his robust, unashamed sense of self-preservation, which contrasts directly with Antonio’s apparent indifference to the fate of his ships and willingness to sacrifice his own life for Bassanio, is evident in his declaration that “life” is dependent on “the means whereby [one] live[s]” (4.1.374-77). As we have seen, he certainly resents Antonio partly because the merchant endangers his profits by “bring[ing] down the rate of usance” (1.3.42-51; see also 3.1.48-50). Moreover, he “dream[s] of money bags” in times of stress (2.5.18). He is, furthermore, undoubtedly horrified by the loss of his gold and his “precious, precious jewels,” as well as by Jessica’s disloyalty (3.1.86-87, 3.1.110-12).

Nevertheless, Shylock’s “bargains and…well-won thrift” are distinguished from Bassanio’s unscrupulous adventuring as sharply as they are from Antonio’s apparently disinterested altruism. The “gain[ing]” of money in return for “giv[ing]” one’s time or effort, which in Shylock’s case involves driving shrewd “bargains”–which are nevertheless not without some risk, as is evident in the case of Antonio–combines the leaden and golden principles in a manner that resolves their respective deficiencies. His faith reinforces the natural sense of justice which governs his transactions: drawing on a story from the Bible which illustrates Jacob’s prudence, he declares that “thrift is blessing, if men steal it not” (1.3.71-90). It should be noted that Jacob was a working “shepherd,” albeit a particularly “skillful” one (1.3.84). Shylock has no problem with being compensated adequately for his own “skill…,” which has no doubt been laboriously acquired, whereas for Antonio the whole concept of earning a living is problematic, especially as his profession seems even further removed than most from the sort of generous service which might accord with his Christian principles.

Ultimately, however, Shylock’s economic transactions are not his primary concern. Ironically, given its proverbial connotations, the pound of flesh contract is in fact notably unmaterialistic: he will “take no doit of usance for [his] moneys,” for, as he himself points out, “a pound of man’s flesh…is not so estimable, profitable neither, as flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats” (1.3.140-41, 1.3.162-67). Moreover, even the hostile Christian observers present Shylock as mentioning the loss of his daughter before that of his ducats, and as longing to punish Jessica firstly for having “fled,” and only secondly for the theft which she has perpetrated (2.8.12-22). When we actually hear him speak about the elopement, he does not even mention his material losses for eighty lines, and when he does it is to wish that his “daughter were dead at [his] foot, and the jewels in her ear!” and again that she “were hears’d at [his] foot, and the ducats in her coffin!” -curses which imply that he would gladly discard everything Jessica stole for a chance to punish her for her disloyalty (3.1.87-90). He is “torture[d]” most acutely by the news that she has sold a ring that was given to him by his deceased wife, Leah, to whose memory he clearly remains devoted; a ring which he himself “would not have given…for a wilderness of monkeys” (3.1.118-23).[[50]](#endnote-50) As Maus puts it, “Shylock pretends that he thinks of people in purely materialistic, economic terms; but he becomes a moving character at precisely those moments when he admits another kind of value.”[[51]](#endnote-51)

However, Shylock generally approaches this other “kind of value” in the same way as he approaches his professional transactions. Both in financial and emotional matters Shylock pays his way and presumes that he will realise a profit in return. His reckless rage at Jessica’s elopement, which in the courtroom scene leads him initially to turn down “thrice” the original loan, implies that the currency that has really mattered to him is the mutual gratitude and care which he assumed would bind him to his daughter forever (4.1.227-30; see also 4.1.318-19).[[52]](#endnote-52) Shylock’s attitude to “well-won thrift” thus provides no more than the most concrete illustration of his broader conviction that “giv[ing]” and “gain[ing]” should always be commensurate.

Shylock only behaves unjustly when he has been driven beyond endurance by his daughter’s disloyalty. Indeed, a close analysis of the events surrounding the elopement might even go some way towards justifying his decision to seize his only opportunity to exact retribution not only on Antonio, but on the circle of Christians who have abetted the elopement, most of whom, as he no doubt appreciates, will be tormented with anger and anxiety as they watch the court proceedings (see, for instance, 4.1.63-68, 4.1.121-42, 4.1.209-17, 4.1.282-92).[[53]](#endnote-53) His determination to take his pound of flesh is by no means as arbitrary as he himself misleadingly asserts (4.1.43-62). He is right to declare to Salerio, “You knew, none so well as you, of my daughter’s flight,” for the latter was certainly one of Lorenzo’s accomplices, as indeed was Gratiano (3.1.24-27, 2.4.28-39, 2.6.1-59). Not only did Gratiano and Salerio help Lorenzo to execute the plan, but it is likely that Bassanio also “conspired” to facilitate the elopement by inviting Shylock to dinner, as Launcelot inadvertently implies–a dinner which also seems to have been designed to enable Jessica to contact Lorenzo via Launcelot–while Launcelot himself not only acts as Jessica’s messenger, but does what he can on his own account to persuade Shylock to attend (2.5.11-13, 2.5.19-22, 2.3.4-9, 2.4.10-20). Ironically, it seems at first that Antonio is almost the only one of the Christians who is not involved in this plot, since he clearly has no idea why Gratiano is late to board the ship which is to take Bassanio to Belmont (2.6.62-66). However, it is the merchant who ensures that “the Duke [is] given to understand” that the couple escaped on a gondola by confirming that they were not on board Bassanio’s ship (2.8.6-11). Salerio’s ambiguous phrase casts doubt on the veracity of this romantic account. Clearly, Shylock is disproportionately vindictive, as he himself seems to acknowledge, but even at this point his actions are still loosely informed by a code of justice (4.1.206).

Shylock is certainly a strict father, but I would argue that his rule is affectionate rather than tyrannical. Given his worries about the masque, it is significant that he trusts his daughter, whom he addresses as “my girl,” to “look to [his] house” and “lock up [his] doors,” rather than doing so himself (2.5.15-16, 2.5.28-29, 2.5.53-55). His main concern, which, as we have seen, the play tends to endorse, seems to be to protect Jessica from the self-love and immoderate sensuality of “Christian fools with varnish’d faces” (2.5.28-36). Clearly, the most effective means of doing so would be to transmit to her his own code of duty and self-restraint. [[54]](#endnote-54)

Shylock’s anguished reaction to Jessica’s elopement provides a measure of the true depth of the bond between father and daughter. At first, when addressing interlocutors whom he knows to be unsympathetic, he merely hints at the intense pain of his loss through generalised rhetorical questions: “If you prick us, do we not bleed...If you poison us, do we not die?” (3.1.64-66). However, he later reveals the full extent of his grief to the trusted Tubal: there are “no sighs but a’ my breathing, no tears but a’ my shedding” (3.1.95-96). It is not until this point in the play that Shylock asserts, “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” and declares that he is “very glad” to hear of Antonio’s unexpected financial misfortunes, since he is now able to “plague” and “torture him” (3.1.66-67, 3.1.113-17). Although Shakespeare leaves these matters deliberately ambiguous–for reasons explored below–many critics have felt that this is the moment when Shylock first determines to cause Antonio serious harm.[[55]](#endnote-55) This is apparently also Solanio’s view, since he chooses this moment to declare that the merchant must “look he keep his day, or he shall pay for this” (3.1.25-26).

Shylock’s enduring anger is a measure of his care for Jessica. Although he later refuses to explain his motive for wishing to take the pound of flesh to a Christian court, choosing instead to provoke his audience in characteristically insouciant fashion by comparing his situation to that of a man who is “troubled with a rat,” or “a gaping pig,” an unobtrusive aside confirms that he is still tormented by Jessica’s elopement: “I have a daughter–would any of the stock of Barrabas had been her husband rather than a Christian!” (4.1.294-97). This comment exposes his ongoing care for Jessica as well as his grief: he fears for her future, having inferred–quite justifiably–from Bassanio and Gratiano’s willingness to sacrifice their wives for Antonio that Christian husbands do not consider the marital bond to be absolutely binding. One should thus not take literally the outpourings by which he seeks to relieve his pain after Jessica’s elopement -as we have seen, he expresses a wish that she “were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!” (3.1.87-90). As one critic notes, “Tubal is sent to search for Jessica, not to poison her” (3.1.79-82, 3.1.90-93; see below).[[56]](#endnote-56)

Shylock’s care for Jessica and his indignation at her ingratitude are both reinforced by his devout faith. He swears “by Jacob’s staff” and “father Abram,” and clearly has a literal belief in the Bible (2.5.36, 1.3.160, 1.3.77-90). Shylock’s God is stern and retributive. He declares that Jessica “is damn’d” for rebelling (2.5.28-36, 3.1.31). Far from habitually restraining his anger in the Christian manner, he has been encouraged by his faith to “feed fat the ancient grudge” when he has suffered egregious wrongs (1.3.47). This does not mean of course that this faith encourages him to punish Antonio with such disproportionate harshness. Although in response to the Duke’s demand to know how he will “hope for mercy, rend’ring none,” he replies, “What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?” this insouciant assertion, although it serves to make the serious point that his own God is just rather than merciful, is soon revealed to be provocative rather than sincere: when Portia invites him to relent, he simply answers, “My deeds upon my head!” (4.1.88-89, 4.1.184-206). He assumes that he will be punished by God for his immoderate vindictiveness.

Shylock was as careful of Jessica as of his “own flesh and blood,” and was encouraged both by natural love and by habitual belief to expect this concern to be requited (3.1.34-38). Paradoxically, far from stifling passion, the rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal social structure which the Jewish faith helps to sustain is generally shown to reinforce the equitable exchanges of care which nurture deep-rooted attachments: Shylock’s heart-felt shock at Jessica’s ingratitude is compounded by his thwarted expectation that she would conform to the pious principles of shame and duty which he has sought to instil in her. As the song which Portia has her musicians sing to Bassanio implies, deep attachments, as compared to those which are “fancy bred,” are “begot” and “nourished” in “the head” as well as “the heart,” since all those who love truly are naturally concerned both to deliver care and to gauge the extent to which it is returned, whether they acknowledge this or not (3.2.62-70). The Jewish faith seeks to enforce the moderation of self-love and sensual desire which this process entails, so that individual lovers are not forced constantly to reinvent the wheel of devoted care and dutiful gratitude, as they may be in contemporary liberal cultures.

Although this emphasis might seem to a liberal audience to invite a cooler approach to relationships than the seemingly unconditional “giv[ing] and hazard[ing]” of Portia and Antonio, Shakespeare covertly suggests that the reverse is in fact the case. Whereas Shylock’s faith reinforces his natural conception of love as a binding web of reciprocal duties, the enshrinement of freely given love as a guiding principle ironically proves to foster a potentially divisive individualism, since, as we have seen, it actively encourages Christians to strive to repress their concern to secure a return for their care, and, by the same token, liberates their beloveds to exploit that care.

It is significant that Solanio makes light of Shylock’s horror at his own “flesh and blood…rebel[ling],” affecting to believe that this phrase refers merely to the weakening of his own capacities (3.1.34-38). Shakespeare shows throughout the play that it is alien to Christian thinking to conceive of attachments as bonds which impose obligations. As his quibble on the phrase “flesh and blood” implies, Solanio’s assumptions are individualistic and self-regarding: he considers, for instance, that “once the bird was flidge…it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam” (3.1.28-30). Ultimately, as I have argued, it is this culture of individualism which encourages the coolness that pertains between Launcelot and his father: neither feel that they have an enduring duty to care for the other. Shylock’s view of Christian culture as inherently conducive to inconstancy is in fact generally borne out by the play: whereas he himself seems to have remained faithful even to the bare memory of Leah, we have seen that the marriages of Bassanio and Lorenzo are built on shaky, materialistic foundations (3.1.120-23). Whereas Shylock values Leah’s ring forever as a symbol of his love, Bassanio gives up Portia’s ring because his wish to show a “swelling port” has left him beholden to the seemingly infinite generosity of Antonio.

To repeat, the overall suggestion therefore seems to be that, just as deep attachments tend to flourish in cultures where love is seen as entailing a binding web of duties, so they may be sapped by Christian and post-Christian liberalism. Paradoxically, a rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal society may support deep attachments more effectively than a liberal one which defines love as unconditional generosity rather than as an exchange of care. (It is worth reemphasising at this point that Jessica’s resentment at the “tediousness” of her upbringing is exacerbated by the fact that, rather than being brought up within a uniformly conservative culture, she has always been surrounded by the temptations of a more liberal one: in a homogenous Jewish community, she might have prioritised her filial affection from the start.)

All of this is not to imply that the Christians lack a dutiful and grateful desire to care for their beloveds, or a sense of guilt and righteous indignation when that desire is thwarted. This would be impossible if, as Shakespeare implies, justice naturally plays an integral role in attachments, even if its influence is at times obscured both by self-love and by conventional doctrine. As we have seen, Bassanio feels deeply guilty when Antonio’s life is threatened because of the loan, while, in reality, the merchant longs for his friend to be bound to him precisely in this way. Likewise, Lorenzo is moved by gratitude to attempt to form a genuine intimacy with Jessica, while even Launcelot eventually accepts his father’s blessing, after he has punished him, however inadequately, for his neglect. Moreover, the Christians’ harsh punishment of Shylock–who was after all doing nothing that anyone in the courtroom initially considered to be unlawful–suggests that the latter is right to suspect that their conventional stance of merciful “humility” is bound to falter when their natural indignation is roused: “If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge” (3.1.67-69). Indeed, as we have seen, this stance is itself unconsciously rooted in a conception of justice. Although, if the above argument is correct, the Christian emphasis on “giv[ing] and hazard[ing] all” may often distort attachments and promote individualism, Shakespeare shows that the desire to form harmonious attachments, along with the guilt and righteous indignation which are its natural corollaries, exerts an unobtrusive, yet ineluctable gravitational pull on all the characters in the play, including the Christians themselves, impelling even the most self-regarding of them to respect basic principles of justice. Particular beliefs may distort and stunt this desire, just as they may facilitate its fulfilment, but they can never entirely eradicate it, any more than the “muddy vesture of decay” can eradicate the music of the spheres (5.1.64).

There is nothing of the lead casket about the passionate Gratiano and little of the gold, at least after he has sworn to devote himself to Nerissa. Gratitude is his key note, as his name suggests. His affection for Antonio and consequent sense of obligation to the lawyers who save his life are so intense that he gives the ring which he promised Nerissa “to keep for ever” to Balthazar’s clerk, as he thinks, even though he must know that his new wife might see this act as a gross betrayal of trust: “I could not for my heart deny it him” (4.2.13-14, 5.1.142-65). Unlike Bassanio, who owes his new found status to Antonio, Gratiano risks his future happiness at this point purely because he feels so indebted to the saviour of a friend whom he loves (4.1.282-92).

Gratiano’s capacity to feel intense gratitude to others is matched by his determination to “get as much as he deserves” for himself. The “love” that moves him to criticise Antonio at the start of the play is simultaneously generous and self-interested in an entirely natural way: seeing that the merchant is “marvellously chang’d” by “care,” so that he “look[s] not well,” he exerts himself to regain a friend with whom he wishes to share “mirth and laughter” (1.1.73-76). The passionate “exhortation” which he delivers to Antonio at this point underlines his conviction that the gratifications of self-love are insubstantial compared to the real pleasures of friendship (1.1.79-104). Gratiano seems to be as unaffected by Christian doctrine as he is by self-love, since his ultimate goal is to “get as much” of these pleasures as he can show his friends that he “deserves.”

Unlike Lorenzo and Bassanio, Gratiano feels passionately drawn to court his wife-to-be, who is of course relatively poor and undistinguished (2.2.178-79; compare 2.6.1-24). Unlike Antonio and Bassanio, he disguises his true nature purely in order to pursue this attachment, rather than to gain “opinion” or social status and wealth (2.2.180-97). He eschews both the gold and the lead casket by giving and gaining in equal measure. Unlike Bassanio on the one hand, who is never shown actively courting Portia, and who boasts of his achievement when he has won her before vowing to be faithful, and Antonio on the other, who denies altogether that his sacrifices are designed to secure his friend’s affection, Gratiano has wooed Nerissa assiduously, “sweat[ing]” repeatedly, and “swearing till [his] very roof was dry with oaths of love,” because for him the emotional stakes are so high (compare 3.2.175-85 and 3.2.203-07).

Gratiano’s sexual desire for Nerissa has clearly reinforced an attachment which he is now bent on deepening through faithful, diligent care. After urging his wife to come to bed quickly, he concludes the play with a heartfelt vow, which is strengthened rather than undermined by its bawdy undertones: “Well, while I live I’ll fear no other thing so sore, as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring” (5.1.300-07). Gratiano’s frank request underlines the fact that he is too passionate to “give and hazard all he hath” without demanding his due rewards. Certainly, these rewards are partly sexual, but, unlike Launcelot, he does not separate physical desire from his urge to start a family, with all the care and dutiful restraint which the fulfilment of this desire will inevitably entail (3.2.213-17). Shakespeare implies that this moderate approach to sexual desire is ultimately more satisfying than Launcelot’s promiscuity, which threatens to leave him permanently isolated.

Nerissa too is loyal and self-controlled: she refuses to leave her mistress until she knows that Portia is to marry Bassanio (3.2.206-09). As we have seen, she informs Portia forthrightly that she must control some of her passions in order to “rightly love” (1.2.3-11). She puts her own advice into practice, since she strives patiently to promote a fully trusting intimacy with those whom she loves: by contrast with Portia’s approach to Bassanio, Nerissa has clearly insisted that her lover should court her diligently in order to prove his loyalty (3.2.203-07). Overall, Gratiano and Nerissa are used to show that Christians who are sufficiently passionate to form deep attachments will naturally be regulated by the silver casket rather than the lead or the gold, since they will strive to earn a trusting intimacy by exercising disciplined care. It is no coincidence that theirs is the only relationship in the play which bids fair to be thoroughly fulfilling.

The one substantial difference between the values of Shylock and Gratiano becomes apparent when, to Shylock’s scorn, Gratiano vows that he would exchange his wife’s life for Antonio’s (4.1.290-95). Whereas for Shylock, the formal ceremony of marriage and all the domestic duties which it entails automatically override all other relationships, the Christian or liberal approach allows non-domestic intimacies to flow more freely at times, even as it tends to dilute them for all the reasons described above, since it prioritises attachments purely on the grounds of natural affection. Thus, friendship is the one area in which Christian doctrine may be more conducive to the formation of deep attachments than the Judaic code. This is not to deny that the Judaic code extends to friendship: Tubal makes determined efforts to locate Jessica and Lorenzo on Shylock’s behalf, and, perhaps in an attempt to console his friend, takes it upon himself to examine Antonio’s financial circumstances and even to manage his arrest (3.1.79-130). However, Shylock would never accept that an old friendship might naturally be valued above a relatively untried marital relationship.

Gratiano and Nerissa resemble Jessica more than their Christian peers in their spirited willingness to attempt to force their friends to face unpalatable truths (compare 1.1.73-104 and 1.2.1-33). By contrast, Bassanio soothingly dismisses Gratiano’s impassioned “exhortation” of Antonio (1.1.113-18), while, as we have seen, Portia eventually turns her scolding of Bassanio to a jest. Ironically, Gratiano, who hates Shylock more intensely than any of his peers, actually resembles him more than he does his fellow Christians both in his direct assertiveness and his fierce, frankly retributive anger. When Portia invites Antonio to show mercy, he interjects, “A halter gratis–nothing else, for God sake” (4.1.379; see also 4.1.364-67, 4.1.398-400). As with Shylock, this anger reflects the depth of his attachments.[[57]](#endnote-57) It is perhaps significant that his exasperation with Shylock in the court scene, which is even more intense than Bassanio’s, although he owes Antonio no financial obligation, drives him to echo the Jew’s own reverential allusions to Daniel, the most famously just prophet of the Old Testament (4.1.333-34, 4.1.340-41). Gratiano is too passionate to be satisfied by a code which promotes “[un]strained” mercy.

Gratiano’s sturdy pursuit of justice is, however, limited by his tribal instincts. He takes the usual Christian view, which Solanio, Launcelot, Antonio and Lorenzo all share, that Shylock is beyond the pale, “currish” rather than human: “thy desires are wolvish, bloody, starv’d, and ravenous” (4.1.128-38; see 2.8.4, 2.8.14, 2.2.1-32, 1.3.111-12, 2.4.33-37). His stock word both for Shylock and Jessica–even after her conversion–is “infidel” (4.1.334, 3.2.217). This attitude no doubt encourages him to help Lorenzo to elope with Jessica and steal her father’s gold (2.4.28-39). The same capacity to form passionate attachments which leads him to behave justly with his friends drives him to identify himself closely with those who share his culture, and to ostracise those whose mores differ from his own.

Although the courtroom scene obviously highlights the tribal divisions in the play most clearly, it is Launcelot who embodies them in their most unvarnished form: he leaves Shylock on the grounds that he is “the very devil incarnation,” refuses to accept that Jessica can be anything but “damn’d,” and feels no responsibility towards “the Moor” whom he impregnates (2.2.1-32, 3.5.1-42). Even Portia’s judgements are ultimately limited in the same way -although she perhaps foreshadows some of the advantages of post-Christian liberalism in her ready acceptance of Jessica and her willingness to give Shylock several chances to show mercy (3.4.37-39, 4.1.182-261). As we have seen, she rejects several suitors, some of whom might have proved more trustworthy than Bassanio, mainly because of cultural differences, and is repelled by “all of [Morocco’s] complexion” (1.2.39-91, 2.7.78-79). Portia, and even the level-headed Nerissa, agree that Bassanio, “of all the men that ever my foolish eyes look’d upon, was the best deserving a fair lady,” partly, one suspects, because he is the only suitor who comports himself in a relatively familiar way (1.2.117-21; see section 1 above).

Shylock himself resembles Gratiano in his tribalism as well as in his passionate sense of justice.[[58]](#endnote-58) Undoubtedly, he hates Antonio in part simply “for he is a Christian,”: the merchant’s willingness to “lend…out money gratis” is only the most egregiously exasperating element of his otherness (1.3.42-47). Shylock robustly reciprocates the prejudice which he experiences: he illustrates the arbitrary divisiveness of conventional beliefs when he tells Bassanio at first that he will not “eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you,” lest he “smell pork” (1.3.32-38). His upbraiding of “Christian husbands” for their infidelity is, as we have seen, partly justified, but at the same time he does not credit the loyal attachment to Antonio which leads Gratiano in particular, who owes his friend nothing but grateful care, to risk disrupting his marriage by ceding Nerissa’s ring. He would surely never come to terms with the fact that Jessica has “fled with a Christian,” even if Lorenzo proved to be the most caring and faithful husband imaginable (2.8.16).

Shylock undoubtedly takes some pride in sharply distinguishing himself from the Christians, who he feels would have him become a “soft and dull-ey’d fool” like themselves, habitually willing “to shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield” (3.3.14-15). He interprets Jessica’s elopement through the lens of Jewish history and tribal identity: “The curse never fell upon our nation till now” (3.1.85-86). Although, if the above argument is correct, his pride may ultimately serve a more useful purpose than that of Antonio and Portia, since it has been sublimated by a faith which usually reinforces attachments, it is still quite divisive on an intercultural level. His prejudices certainly contribute to his ultimate determination to take his pound of flesh, thus punishing the Christians generically, as it were, without concerning himself too closely with individual culpability -although, as we have seen, those whom he particularly torments did indeed probably help Lorenzo and Jessica to carry out their unscrupulous plan. In sum, the proud allegiance to their respective tribes which both the Christian and the Jewish characters frequently display drives them to discriminate against those who do not share their conventional manners and beliefs.

Full obedience to the injunction inscribed on the silver casket would require one to transcend such cultural allegiances. The only character in the play who does so is Arragon, who declares that the lead casket “shall look fairer ere I give or hazard,” and rejects the gold as representing the desires of “the fool multitude that choose by show, not learning more than the fond eye doth teach” (2.9.20-33). Arragon understands that the silver casket principle would transform society radically, if it were carried through to a logical conclusion: “How many then should cover that stand bare? How many be commanded that command?” (2.9.44-49). According to the above argument, not only the relatively low status Gratiano–who is twice patronisingly criticised by Bassanio, and defers to the latter when he wishes to marry his wife’s waiting gentle-woman (1.1.114-18, 2.2.180-98, 3.5.189-195; see also 5.1.263-66)–but the generally despised Shylock might “command,” if society were regulated by those who genuinely possess “the stamp of merit,” rather than by those, like Bassanio and Lorenzo perhaps, whose “estates, degrees, and offices have been “deriv’d corruptly” (2.9.38-49).

The example of Arragon indicates that silver casket values need to be completed by philosophy, which alone can expose the arbitrariness of many customary opinions. Arragon’s radical version of these values would presumably involve discarding the habitual beliefs which, while often promoting justice within particular communities, tend to divide communities from each other. It may be significant that he seems to hail from a region of Spain which had for centuries experienced Islamic rule.[[59]](#endnote-59) Although Aragon became the last of such regions to impose Christian conversion in 1525, a large number of Muslims continued to practise their religion clandestinely. Here, Arragon would have been given the same chance to compare Christianity with a religion that is based on the Old Testament which Shakespeare offers his own audiences and readers.

One of Portia’s early suitors, the County Palentine, who bids fair to be a “weeping philosopher,” perhaps embodies the natural justice of the philosophically minded when he “frown[s], as who should say, ‘And you will not have me, choose’”: Portia fails to recognise that he is the only one of her suitors who might be able to moderate his desire for her beauty and wealth sufficiently to refrain from taking the casket test, if he felt that she could never love him (1.2.45-53).

Surprisingly, the poem contained in the silver casket does not, as one might have imagined, argue in Portia’s manner for prioritising “[un]strained” love over justice, but simply points out that truly just judgements can only be made by those few who are able and willing to take great pains to do so, a process which is implicitly compared to the repeated firing whereby silver is eventually purged of its impurities: “The fire seven times tried this: seven times tried that judgment is, that did never choose amiss” (2.9.63-65). Perhaps Portia’s father strove to ensure that his daughter married a sincere Christian only because he knew that philosophers were so rare. He betrays his underlying sympathy with those who choose the silver casket, whether for philosophical or religious reasons, by allowing them to contravene the conditions of the test and “take what wife [they] will to bed” (2.9.11-13, 2.9.70).

Like Portia’s father, perhaps, and like Arragon, whose vision of a perfectly just society is more of a thought experiment than a call for radical change, Shakespeare accepts that society has to operate at several removes from absolute justice, since it is inevitably regulated by common opinions. By apparently celebrating the lead casket, the play endorses Portia’s father’s implicit view that, given the scarcity of philosophers, the Christian faith has its uses. Although we have seen that in many instances the lead casket principle may easily collapse into the gold, characters like Antonio, or Portia herself, who represent the minority who take seriously the injunction “to give and hazard all,” do at least eschew the basest and most divisive forms of self-love, and so, with all the caveats outlined in the first section, are still more likely to form lasting attachments than those who simply seek to “gain what many men desire.” Indeed, as Portia’s father perhaps realised, two Christians who scrupulously follow the lead casket principle, and so “bear an egall yoke of love,” will, almost despite themselves, generally fulfil their repressed desire to see their care justly requited (3.4.13). Ironically, Shakespeare’s reticence regarding the real nature of justice could thus itself be seen as just.

Nevertheless, the play covertly suggests that Judaism is generally more likely to provide a dim echo of Arragon’s revolutionary vision than Christianity. It is significant that, apart from Arragon, Shylock is the only character who is occasionally capable of appreciating the radical implications of the silver casket principle. In his most famous speech, he invokes an innate principle of justice which transcends cultural differences: after reminding his Christian audience that his “hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions” are the same as theirs, he insists, correctly as it turns out, that, despite their artificial “humility,” they too would soon give vent to natural indignation if they were “wrong[ed]” as he has been (3.1.59-73). In the courtroom scene, moreover, he imagines the disruption which would ensue if his Christian audience should begin to treat their slaves as equals: “Marry them to your heirs! Why sweat they under burthens? Let their beds be made as soft as yours…” (4.1.90-96). It is not surprising that Shylock is more open to such radical ideas than the Christians, since he has been habituated to a moral code which enshrines justice as its key principle. It is relevant to recall that Shylock’s treatment of Launcelot is probably fair, despite the latter’s complaints (2.5.46-48, see 2.5.3-5, 2.2.106-07, 2.2.1-32). Furthermore, if the above interpretation of the pound of flesh contract is correct, then it is Shylock rather than the Christians who attempts to engineer a reconciliation between the two communities.

# Conclusion

Shakespeare uses the music of the spheres to symbolise the pervasive, lasting satisfaction which, according to his intuition, may be gained when souls unite in a perfectly harmonious, trusting intimacy. The symbol suggests both that this satisfaction can be supremely fulfilling if pursued whole-heartedly and that it is sufficiently calm and unobtrusive to be overshadowed at times by more vivid stimuli, which appeal to self-love and sensual desire. Jessica shows her underlying appreciation of the equitable exchanges of care which deep attachments naturally demand when she hopes that Bassanio will be led to attempt to match Portia’s virtues by his desire to obtain “the joys of heaven here on earth” (3.5.73-83). Gratiano’s determination to “sweat again, and swear till [his] very roof was dry with oaths of love” in order to get “a promise…to have [Nerissa’s] love” indicates that truly passionate lovers may only earn their beloveds’ trust by showing self-controlled devotion, while his mistress’s insistence that he should do so illustrates the strength of the natural urge to ensure that love is requited in this way (3.2.203-08). Jessica and Nerissa understand that moderate and prudent interactions of this sort, involving both “the head” and “the heart” are likely to generate a much more intimate, trusting union than the intense but ephemeral gratifications of a purely sensual “fancy” (3.2.63-71). This transactional approach to attachments is encapsulated in the phrase inscribed on the silver casket: “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.”

It is significant that it is left to the Jewish Jessica to draw an explicit link between deep attachments and “an upright life.” Her remark that, “if on earth [Bassanio] do not merit” the “blessing” of Portia, “in reason he should never come heaven,” suggests that the natural imperatives of love outlined in the paragraph above may often be reinforced by religious traditions which enshrine justice as the primary virtue (3.5.75-78). The contrast between Bassanio’s decision to give Portia’s ring to ‘Balthazar’ and Shylock’s determination to cherish the ring that Leah gave him even after his wife’s death, suggests that the Jewish characters are more likely than the Christians to see love as imposing a binding set of duties. The very intensity of Shylock’s fury with Jessica might remind us that, quite apart from his deep-rooted attachment to her, he has been schooled to believe that care should always be requited by children as dutifully as it is delivered by parents. Similarly, although Jessica’s initial determination to advance herself at her father’s expense indicates that even the combined effect of natural attachment and conventional belief is not always proof against the vivid enticements of ambition and sensual desire, the bitterness of her subsequent guilt provides a measure, not only of her underlying bond with Shylock, but of the enduring influence exerted by her habituation to a code of pious duty.

“Get[ting] as much as [one] deserves” is implicitly offered as a resolution to the play’s underlying dialectic. Whereas the lead casket principle is largely conventional, while the gold simply represents the baser elements of human nature, the silver yokes together the deep-seated natural needs and the conventional beliefs which encourage the just exchanges of dutiful care that satisfy those needs. The silver casket stands for an equitable balance between the one-sided “giv[ing]” and “gain[ing]” of the other two caskets. Once the underlying argument of the play is understood, Jewish money-lending takes on a broader significance: usury may be distinguished on the one hand from Lorenzo and Bassanio’s unmerited financial “gain,” since it involves a degree of shrewdly taken risk, not to mention the laborious acquisition of a principal, and on the other from the apparently unconditional “giv[ing]” of Antonio and Portia, since it is explicitly designed to secure a profit. Shylock certainly pursues his own interests much more overtly than Antonio, but at the same time he knows that, in order to satisfy his various needs, whether personal or professional, he must invest both his “well-won thrift” and his dutiful care. While he is also prepared to make generous advances, even to enemies, these “ventures,” to use a term which recurs several times in the play, are by no means purely altruistic, but are designed to win gratitude and trust.

However, even as the Judaic code reinforces attachments, it foments intercultural divisions, as any robust faith is bound to do. The same can be true of Christianity of course, as is made clear by the racial prejudice which Shylock experiences throughout the play -although the liberal laws which guarantee the rights of Jewish money-lenders, not to mention Portia’s warm treatment of Jessica, appear to foreshadow an era of post-Christian tolerance. Some of these divisions are admittedly substantial–indeed, the play suggests that the differences between the Christian and Judaic faiths affect the way in which their adherents approach their deepest attachments–but others seem quite petty, as when Shylock’s habitual eschewal of pork initially prevents him from accepting Bassanio’s invitation to dinner. At this level, doctrinal differences may be viewed simply as particularly authoritative instances of the superficial ‘otherness’ which Portia finds so repellent in her various foreign suitors.

These divisions are bound to obscure true merit. The portrayal of Arragon suggests that the silver casket principle may only be followed with absolute rigour by philosophers, since they alone can avoid being distracted by arbitrary customs. Nevertheless, since philosophy is inevitably restricted to the few who are sufficiently curious to allow their judgement to be “seven times tried,” Portia’s father has seemingly decided that it must be left to Christianity to support, however imperfectly, the natural desire to secure lasting attachments (2.9.63-65). Perhaps the casket test might actually have achieved its goal if Portia had not interfered, since one might suppose that two Christians who are equally prepared to “give and hazard all” would indeed be able to establish the equitable exchanges of care which sustain fulfilling attachments.

Portia and Antonio seem to exemplify the few who seriously attempt to regulate their lives by the lead casket principle, or in Portia’s case, by a secularised version of the doctrine, which in many ways foreshadows modern liberalism. However, although this principle undoubtedly encourages them to eschew the baser varieties of self-love which drive many of their peers, it tends to be detrimental to deep attachments -except perhaps between lovers who happen to share a determination to “give and hazard all” in the manner described above. Neither Portia nor Antonio can establish a fully intimate relationship with Bassanio, precisely because they both allow him to exploit their generosity without concertedly demanding a return. Whereas Shylock takes pride in adhering to a code of duty which reinforces equitable attachments, Portia and Antonio’s effort to distinguish themselves through their pure altruism constantly “wear[ies]” them, since it impedes them from engaging in the reciprocal exchanges of care which may gradually deepen trust.

Nevertheless, as is entirely natural, Antonio and Portia both eventually feel compelled to attempt to secure a return for their care for Bassanio: Antonio constantly eminds him of his obligations, while Portia rebukes him for his infidelity. However, the pride which both characters habitually take in their own selfless altruism conflicts with this natural urge, rendering these efforts insufficiently direct and forceful to generate the mutually trusting intimacy for which they yearn. Both thus seem fated to oscillate uneasily between the silver casket and the lead. This point is underlined in the courtroom, where they show an entirely natural indignation, which conflicts with their conventional conviction that mercy should override justice. The combination of these two motives leads Antonio to treat Shylock relatively leniently in material terms, in that he allows him both to live and to preserve half “the means whereby [he] live[s],” while at the same time punishing him with egregious harshness in emotional terms by forcing him to convert to Christianity and will all his money to Jessica and Lorenzo (4.1.347-90).

Not only does the unconditional generosity which both Portia and Antonio show to Bassanio create seemingly irremediable fault-lines in their own attachments, but it enables that “prodigal” adventurer to pursue “what many men desire” in a manner which is limited only by his own underlying sense of justice. The pervasive decadence of Venice points to the way in which Christian doctrine may ultimately serve to emancipate self-love. Launcelot’s fragmented family and serial affairs furnish the most egregious example of the loosening of bonds that may occur once the commandments to honour one’s parents and refrain from adultery have been replaced by the injunction to “give and hazard all,” which encourages a generous forgiveness of potentially divisive faults. Launcelot is typical of those who might fall victim to the gold casket in the liberal climate which this principle promotes, in that his self-regard deprives him of the ability to form deep attachments, while offering him in return only transient physical pleasure and the insubstantial gratifications of social status: “Many a man his life has sold, but my outside to behold.”

Like Antonio and Portia, however, Lorenzo and Bassanio are also moved by a desire to give and “get as much as [they] deserve;” inevitably so, perhaps, since this desire is firmly rooted in the very nature of attachments. Their continuing efforts to ingratiate themselves with Jessica and Portia respectively suggest that, having satisfied their acquisitiveness and desire to display a “swelling port,” they both subsequently hope to earn the trust upon which intimate attachments must be founded. As is implied in act 5 through the images of candle-light and music, both natural and divine, the yearning to form lasting, trusting attachments exercises a constant, unobtrusive influence, which cannot be permanently overshadowed by the vivid inducements of self-love and sensual desire.

Yet while these efforts certainly illustrate the enduring power of the innate urges represented by the silver casket to counter the equally pervasive enticements of the gold casket, they seem doomed to be frustrated. Just as the gestures which Gobbo and Launcelot make towards atonement and retribution respectively are shown to fall far short of what would be needed in order to achieve a true reconciliation, so the play encourages us to criticise Lorenzo and Bassanio’s assumption that they can establish a trusting intimacy with their respective wives without even acknowledging, far less atoning for, the self-love which gave these relationships their initial impetus. Ironically, these Christians’ faith in the power of “[un]strained” love leads them to attempt to bypass the imperatives that naturally govern intimate relationships, which demand a proportionately rigorous expiation of any failure to provide self-denying care. Having been habituated to a culture which, far from explicitly stigmatising their baser desires, encourages them to believe that all may be forgiven in the end, Bassanio and Lorenzo seem fated to oscillate perpetually between the gold and the silver casket, rather as Antonio and Portia oscillate between the lead and the silver.

Thus, in their different ways the Christian characters almost all fall victim to the liberal teaching of the lead casket: this teaching helps to deprive Launcelot, Bassanio and Gratiano of the restraints which might have encouraged them to live a sufficiently “upright life” to earn the trust of their wives, while at the same time artificially stunting Portia and Antonio’s natural sense that they have a right to demand a return for their care. In both these cases Christian doctrine is detrimental to the formation of deep attachments -although the deep-seated urge to form such attachments constantly moderates both the self-love of the former group of characters and the unconditional generosity of the latter. By contrast, ironically, Jewish culture, which might seem “strained” and rigidly hierarchical when compared to the liberalism which the Christian doctrine of unconditional love promotes, nevertheless generally supports deep attachments, since it seeks to enforce the equitable exchanges of dutiful care which they demand. The only area in which the Christian faith might be more conducive than the Judaic to the formation of deep attachments is friendship, since the Jewish faith, as it is portrayed in the play, automatically prioritises marital vows above all other bonds in a manner that seems entirely conventional.

One may tease out a hierarchy of regulatory principles from the play, ranked according to extent to which they are conducive to the equitable exchanges of care which promote deep intimacy. At the apex is Arragon’s philosophical understanding of justice, which allows him to recognise true merit in any context. This understanding is dimly reflected in the Jewish faith, which, although encrusted with arbitrary and divisive customs, nevertheless reinforces personal bonds by commanding its adherents to care for each other equitably in a restrained and dutiful manner. On the same level, Nerissa and Gratiano show that a minority of passionate Christians will also naturally feel impelled to ignore the lead casket injunction and strive to ensure that their love is requited, even if they too are unable free themselves from a divisive tribalism. On the next level down, we have Portia and Antonio, whose faith reinforces their determination to care for their beloveds, but at the same time leads them to attempt to repress their natural desire to see this care returned. Beneath these again, we have Christians like Bassanio and Lorenzo, who are influenced by the injunction to “give and hazard all” only to the extent that it side-lines the ten commandments, and encourages them to feel that divisive faults will easily be forgiven. Such characters are nevertheless still partly swayed by gratitude and a belated guilt, but only because these emotions are embedded in the very nature of lasting attachments. At the bottom of this scale is Launcelot, whose self-love and sensual desire have been so thoroughly emancipated by the liberal culture to which he has been habituated as almost to deprive him altogether of the capacity to form deep attachments. It should be remembered, however, that even Launcelot asks his father to bless him, and, moreover, remains humbly kneeling for an extended period while he does so.

If the above argument is correct, Shakespeare clearly needs to disguise his real views even more carefully than usual in this play, since his main aim is to show that the central Christian doctrine is generally detrimental to the pursuit of what he conceives to be the ultimate good. It would of course have been imprudent to have explicitly celebrated the virtues of the silver casket at the expense of the lead, or perhaps even to have shown us enough of Shylock’s domestic life, or of the softer feelings which underlie his gruff, sardonic self-assertion, to invite unqualified sympathy. The comedy of the final wrangling over the rings allows many in the audience to lay aside both their sympathy for Shylock and any criticisms which they may have formed of the Christians.[[60]](#endnote-60) Shakespeare offers Bassanio as the handsome hero in what one critic has described as “a gilded world…of luxury and leisure, of idle talk and frivolity, of music and romance,” while inviting audiences to forget the very existence of the man who ultimately provided him with the money to pursue his ambitions.[[61]](#endnote-61) Similarly, Lorenzo’s poetic and romantic evocation of the music of the spheres seems calculated to distract many in the audience from the economic imperatives which originally drove him to elope with Jessica. We are reminded of these only at the very end of the play when he welcomes Shylock’s enforced deed of gift as “manna” for “starved people” (5.1.294-95).[[62]](#endnote-62) Quite apart from his concern to protect himself, Shakespeare perhaps considers that any attempt to bring about the radical changes which are explored by Arragon would be dangerously disruptive. Beyond either of these prudential motives, however, his multi-levelled rhetorical strategy also serves a positive, erotic purpose, namely to provide food for thought for those readers who take delight in having their judgements “seven times tried.”

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1. All references to this play and other plays by Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For the identification of Antonio with the lead casket (and Shylock with the silver), see John Russell Brown, “Love’s Wealth and *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Shakespeare: “The Merchant of Venice”* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1969): 164. For the view that Antonio embodies the New Law of sacrifice, as compared to the Old Law of judgement, which is represented by Shylock, see Neville Coghill, “The Theme of *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of “The Merchant of Venice*,” ed. Sylvan Barnet (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall, 1970): 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Graham Midgley, “*The Merchant of Venice*: A Reconsideration,” in *Shakespeare: “The Merchant of Venice”*: 200; Grace Tiffany, “Names in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*, ed. Joh Mahon and Ellen Mahon (New York and London: Routledge, 2002): 354-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Goddard: 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Harold C. Goddard, “The Three Caskets” in *Shakespeare: “The Merchant of Venice”*: 148; Alice Benston, “Portia, the Law, and the Tripartite Structure of *The Merchant of Venice*,” in “*The Merchant of Venice”: Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Wheeler (New York and London: Garland, 1991): 189; Moody, “The Letter of the Law (III.iii-v; IV.i),” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: Critical Essays*: 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Goddard: 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Antonio is perhaps named after St. Anthony the Great, who would have been seen as embodying the Christian ideal of selflessness: Cynthia Lewis, *Particular Saints: Shakespeare’s Four Antonios, Their Contexts, and Their Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997): 53. See also Murray Levith, *What’s in Shakespeare’s Names?* (Hamden CT: Shoestring Press, 1978): 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Halio brings out the ambivalence of Antonio’s feelings towards Bassanio, as he finds himself “caught between his love for his friend and a desire to see him prosper”: “Singing Chords: Performing Shylock and Other Characters in *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 372. For the “reproach” concealed in the letter see Bill Overton, “The Problem of Shylock,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: Critical Essays*: 311. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Katherine Maus, *The Norton Shakespeare*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Katherine Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997): 1086. For Leonard Tennenhouse, Antonio is a “particularly disturbing” character because his “apparent selflessness consists of denying those very needs and dependencies upon which he acts”: “The Counterfeit Order of *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: Critical Essays*: 204. He denies, for instance, that he is “competing with Portia for the love of Bassanio or that he is at all envious of the relationship.” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Joo-Hyon Kim underlines the resemblances between Antonio and Christ himself in *Bi-Cultural Critical Essays on Shakespeare* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995): 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Barbara Tovey, “The Golden Casket: An Interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, eds. John Alvis and Thomas West (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1981): 215-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Robert Hapgood describes Bassanio as “precisely the kind of man [Portia’s] father most wanted to eliminate,” in “Portia and *The Merchant of Venice*: The Gentle Bond,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 28.1 (1967): 19-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Goddard: 156-57; Karoline Szatek, “*The Merchant of Venice* and the Politics of Commerce,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 331. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.85-89; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2.2.39-61; *The Winter’s Tale*, 4.4.35-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For the identification of Portia with the lead casket, see Brown: 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. A. D. Moody: 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. M. C. Bradbrook calls the speech “the most purely religious utterance in the canon”: “Moral Theme and Romantic Story,” in *Shakespeare: “The Merchant of Venice”*: 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hugh Short, “Shylock is Content,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 204-07. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Overton: 307. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Goddard: 159; Moody: 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. John Palmer, “Shylock,” in *Shakespeare: “The Merchant of Venice”*: 130. For a survey of the many critics who find Portia hypocritical in this scene see Short: 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Overton: 303. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Harold Bloom calls this “the final turn of the torturer’s screw”: *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998): 175. See also Szatek: 343. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Susan McLean, cited in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 84-85: “the sinner who believes and begs forgiveness will find mercy, while the self-righteous and the non-believer will not.” Actual righteousness becomes irrelevant because it is entirely compatible with pride. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Jude Kelly, who directed the play in 1994, argues that “the fifth act is all about the tragedy of Portia revealing to Bassanio what she knows. In the end it’s ‘We’ll discuss it,” but can they move forward or not? Because they have destroyed so much”: quoted in Elizabeth Schafer, *Ms-Directing Shakespeare* (London: The Women’s Press, 1998): 122. See also the analysis of Trevor Nunn’s production by Penny Gay in “Portia Performs: Playing the Role in the Twentieth-Century English Theater,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 450-51. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Goddard: 142-44. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Halio: 373. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. George Brandes sees Bassanio as a “weak spendthrift”: *William Shakespeare, A Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1911): 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Goddard: 145-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Tiffany: 357. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Auden: 237 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Goddard: 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Szatek: 338-39. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See Book 7 of Ovid’s Metamorphoses. If Portia does indeed circumvent her father’s wishes in order to win

    Bassanio, then she too resembles Medea -although the blitheness with which she does so is contrasted to the regret which both Medea and Jessica experience: John Velz, “Portia and the Ovidian Grotesque,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 182-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Jonathan Miller’s 1970 National Theatre production portrayed Jessica as “reflecting silently on the enormity of her elopement” at the end of the play: John Drakakis, “Jessica,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 145. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. For the puns on “steal” in this interchange see Overton: 309. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Heinrich Heine views the whole play as “a satire against Christianity”: *Shakespeare: “The Merchant of Venice”*: 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Moody identifies this celestial music with “the harmonious ordering of things by Love”: 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Holmer: 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. By contrast, Jessica is deeply ashamed of her male disguise in act 2, scene 6, since it violates Judaic precept (Deut.22.5): Joan Ozark Holmer, “The Question of Philo-Semitism in Elizabethan Drama,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. For Antonio’s hubris, see Richard Moulton in *Shakespeare: “The Merchant of Venice”*: 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Goddard: 153; Halio: 371. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. For a similar view, see Short: 202-03. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Goddard: 155; Midgley: 204. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Midgley:204-05. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Overton: 300-01. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. For Shylock’s power fantasies, see Goddard: 153-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. See the conclusion below for a full analysis of this point. Hazlitt assumes that Shylock becomes “a half-favourite” only with “the philosophical part of the audience, who are disposed to think that Jewish revenge is at least as good as Christian injuries”:27. See also Heine: 29. Desai argues that “the play spills onto two levels: the “proper” one ensuring the rejection and dismissal of the threatening alien, the Other, and the “sympathetic” one which seems to partly negate the former…”: “Mislike Me Not for My Complexion,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 316. Tiffany associates Shylock’s name with extreme guardedness: 358. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Moulton: 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Maus: 1085. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Maus: 1085. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. E. E. Stoll, “Shylock,” in *Shakespeare: “The Merchant of Venice”*: 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Short: 205. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. I would agree with Trevor Nunn’s interpretation of Shylock as a “religious, conservative Jew” who “feels profoundly that the hedonistic Christian society of the louche, materialistic Bassanio and his friends has irredeemably lost its way”: O’Connor, “Shylock in Performance,” in *“The Merchant of Venice”: New Critical Essays*: 422. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Halio: 372; O’Connor: 402-03, 411, 420, 423; Midgley: 198; Tennenhouse: 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Holmer: 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Overton: 310. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Stoll: 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. He may well indeed look Arabic, as Desai argues: 314-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Moody argues that the reader carries with them “a serious critical awareness of what has been felt in the tragic part” of the play, “which, while it does not destroy the comedy, causes us to judge it by values which it fails to comprehend”: 97-99. If we hold on to our sympathy with Shylock, the comedy of Act 5 actually exacerbates our criticism of the Christians, and indeed of ourselves, insofar as we have been “attracted to the

    happily amoral Christians.” Yet at the same time we are allowed, or perhaps even encouraged, to “rejoice” in the apparent beauties of Belmont, and to “set aside” our feelings about Shylock at the end of the play. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Goddard: 142-46; Midgley: 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Drakakis aptly describes Belmont as “Venice’s fantasy of itself, a place where the world of fiscal exchange can be transmuted into the mystifying romantic discourses of social harmony”: 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)